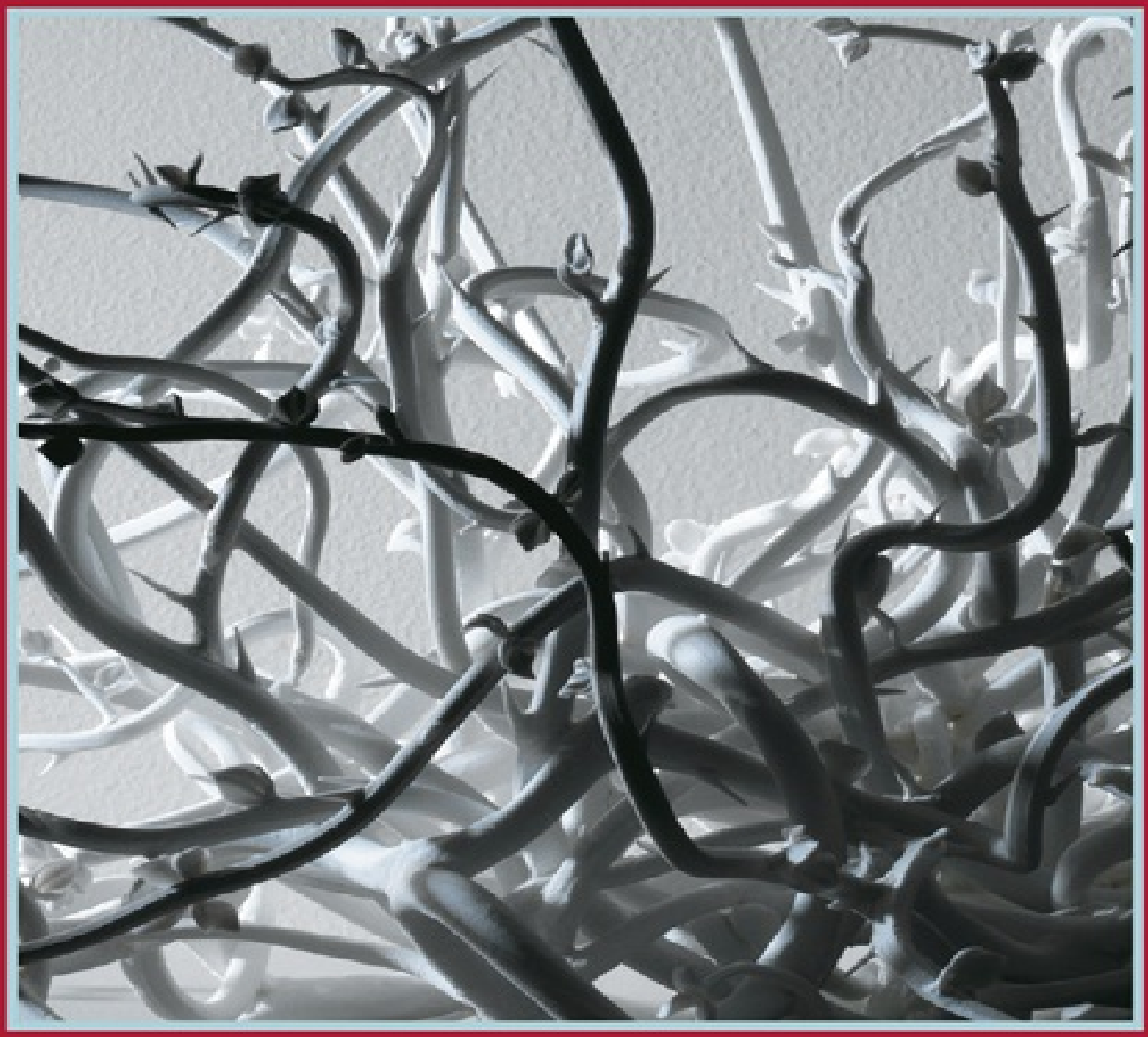
THE THREE LEAPS OF WANG LUN

BY ALFRED DÖBLIN

TRANSLATED BY C. D. GODWIN



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THE THREE LEAPS OF WANG LUN

A CHINESE NOVEL

By Alfred Döblin
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Contents

Cover
Title Page
Copyright

Introduction by C. D. Godwin

Dedication

Prologue: The Attack on Chao Lao-hsü
Book One: Wang Lun
Book Two: The Broken Melon
Book Three: Lord of the Yellow Earth
Book Four: The Western Paradise

Appendix: The Insurrection of Wang Lun, in 1774

Introduction

The Three Leaps of Wang Lun was Alfred Döblin's first major work, and the first Western novel to depict a China untouched by the West. It was also the first modern German novel. Written just before the Great War and published in 1915, it was hailed as a masterpiece of the new movement called Expressionism, and won the Fontane Prize. In style and theme it marked a decisive break with the narrative tradition of the nineteenth century, and was to influence Brecht and Günter Grass. Why then is this book today so little known, even in German?[1] The answer lies only partly in the book itself (which is by no means an easy or a comfortable read) and has more perhaps to do with Döblin's own fate and the fate of German literature in the catastrophe of the Third Reich.

Döblin began *Wang Lun* in July 1912, and completed the two-thousand page manuscript in just ten months. He was working all the while as a doctor, "Lots of casualty duty, day and night … I wrote on steps, in the empty hours of waiting, could write walking or standing."[2] As a medical student in the first years of the century he mingled with the café society of artists and writers who were creating Berlin's version of the modern movement, later labelled Expressionism. Literary doctors are not rare; in Döblin's case the choice of profession was no mere bread-and-butter one but reflected a profound duality. "I am a medical man," he wrote,

> and not just as a sideline … I studied medicine because I was writing while still at school, but detested literature and still more those who produced it. I felt towards my own writing something of what a man with a chronic cold feels towards his sniffles … When I

> finished studying I was in my mid-twenties and couldn't wait to withdraw from the struggle for so-called existence. I worked as houseman in several mental hospitals. I always felt comfortable among these patients. I realized then there are only two categories of people I can stand, besides plants, animals and stones: namely children and lunatics …[3]

This complexity of themes is rooted in Döblin's family and the disaster that struck in 1888, when he was ten. The father, musically talented but feckless, absconded to America with a young woman employed in his tailoring business, leaving to the mother his debts and five children. Arrival in Berlin, where the family moved to be near relatives, was for Döblin his true birth. The years in Stettin had been a "pre-birth", a "little paradise", marred only by his father's philandering; life in Berlin meant dismal rooms and shared beds, but also a new world: the big city. Small and shortsighted, poor, a provincial Jew, his education delayed some years by the family catastrophe, Döblin left school at 22 with a reputation as a rebel and a loathing for the militarism of the Wilhelmine state. He was also thoroughly at home in the fast growing metropolis which was to provide the matter of his only bestseller, *Berlin Alexanderplatz*.

His father's family had artistic leanings, while his mother, of shopkeeper stock, had a low opinion of any activity that brought no income. Döblin was drawn to literature and philosophy, yet repelled by the bad example his father set for all that side of life. His early writings were a guilty secret. His mother had coped admirably to raise the family, yet life for her meant duty and little more. How to reconcile literature and duty, how to dig beneath the surface of life without retreating to mere speculation? Medicine on one level was a respectable career, but the choice of psychiatry reflected these deeper currents. "Why did I begin to study medicine? Because I wanted truth, but not a truth filtered by concepts and so diluted and frayed."[4] He wrote much in these early years: papers in medical journals, a series of dialogues on the meaning of music, some essays (never published) on philosophy, a one-act play, a few short stories; but gave little hint of the imaginative power that was to produce *Wang Lun* and the epic novels of the next four decades. The scientific observation of psychiatric patients may have seemed to him a

"withdrawal from the struggle for existence"; but this exposure to forms of human behaviour and states of spirit very different from those of normal society was crucial to the problems he would spend a lifetime addressing.

The damburst of creative energy in 1912, when he wrote this "fat Chinese novel" that broke all conventions of bourgeois fiction, coincided with events on the literary scene and in his personal life which together brought on a sort of crisis. The personal event was his marriage in January 1912, to a woman of his mother's type—a union stormy from the start, though it lasted to the end of his life. He had now to set up his own medical practice, a change of work he found "odious". The literary event was Berlin's first Futurist Exhibition in the spring of 1912, an exhibition of modern paintings (mostly French) that also attracted to Berlin the leading Italian propagandist of Futurism in literature, F. T. Marinetti. Two years earlier Döblin had helped Herwarth Walden, the organizer of the exhibition, to found *Der Sturm*, Berlin's leading avant garde magazine, and Döblin's review of the exhibition in the May 1912 issue praised the bold, gigantic style of Futurist painting. He urged German painters, "The horror, the sympathy, the rage, the terror in you—out with it onto the canvas!... Futurism is a great step. It represents an act of liberation.... I am no friend of big inflated words. But I subscribe my whole name to Futurism and give it a clear Yes."

Marinetti was a prolific penner of manifestos, extolling with gusto speed and war and aeroplanes and spelling out the rules of good Futurist style: verbs in the infinitive, no adjectives or adverbs, nouns strung together without conjunctions, similes as farfetched as you can make them; the "I" driven out of the novel and with it all psychology, since Man has become a mere cliché in literature.[5] A number of manifestos were printed in *Der Sturm*. In March 1913, in the middle of his work on *Wang Lun*, Döblin published an open letter to Marinetti in which he acknowledges some of the Futurist's goals

("You have energy and hardness, masculinity, which should be unleashed with pleasure on the heels of a literature bursting with eroticism, hypochondria, distortions and torments … We want no prettification, no finery, no style … What is not immediate, not sated with objectivity, we both reject …") but then, in sharp contrast to his own enthusiasm of the previous year, he harshly criticises Marinetti's abstract aestheticism, his desire to cast words adrift, "the catastrophe of missing punctuation and missing syntax." Döblin ended his letter, "You tend your Futurism. I'll tend my Döblinism."

A few months later, as he was finishing *Wang Lun*, Döblin published an essay[6] calling for the rebirth of the novel as a work of art and a modern epic. He urges the writer to learn from psychiatry, which has shaken off psychology's pretence to explain human actions, and limits itself to the "noting of events, movements—with a shake of the head, shrug of the shoulders for the rest, the why and how." He advocates a prose of "events" in which the motivation is not made explicit, and there are no authorial judgements—a programme realized to some degree in *Wang Lun*. Döblin was taking leave of the Futurists; they responded by ignoring *Wang Lun* and growing cool towards its author. "Neither Walden nor anyone else from the circle of the orthodox said a word about the novel.… They developed into pure word-artists. I took another path."[7] Döblin's individuality and distaste for cliques emerged stronger from the experience. He became one of the century's greatest writers of German, while the self-styled Expressionists degenerated into "proclaiming the autonomy of the empty word, of wordshells, soundshells that they called 'sensuous'. They turned words into mere sounds and noises, steered verbal art onto the cliff of music."[8]

Did Döblin choose China for his first major work because Marinetti, in his novel *Mafarka the Futurist*, had already done Africa and so he needed somewhere still farther off?[9] Was he drawing on a generalized "oriental" philosophy that could equally well have used India as a setting?[10] The first view is facile, and the second is refuted

by Döblin's claim to have had "a basic spiritual experience or focus which I guarded with the utmost care; served it, furnished it with everything necessary for its working out."[11] This was his experience of Taoism, that essentially Chinese religion, which he discovered in translations by Martin Buber and Richard Wilhelm.[12] It gave shape to his discontent with the neglect of existential meaning in modern literature. "In our bourgeois society," he wrote,

> doubtless in every society, only a little of us is expressed. We sleep for the most part, a large number of questions are never asked, life plays itself along in a prescribed circle. People curl themselves up like hedgehogs.… Once hunger and cold, love and a place to live and perhaps ambition are taken care of, what is left? Over the remainder of existence —what a vast remainder—a veil is drawn.[13]

While political upheavals in China—the Boxer uprising in 1900, the downfall of the Manchus in 1912—must have nudged Döblin towards this choice, in the novel there is no overt reference to contemporary events, apart perhaps from one phrase in the Dedication ("In this Earth's life two thousand years are as one year"). Döblin was no sinologist, and after *Wang Lun* his only work relating to China was an introduction to a selection from Confucius, published in America in 1940. He had not even prepared the ground with extensive reading before embarking on *Wang Lun*. He began to visit the Museum of Ethnology in Berlin and to read travelogues and descriptions of Chinese customs only in the summer of 1912, and in October was still writing to Martin Buber for guidance on source materials. The reading, the writing and the working out of the problem were simultaneous processes. "I went through so many books on China at that time," he wrote,

> but if anyone had asked me an hour after the reading what was in the book I could not have answered. I had more to do then than busy myself with Chinese porcelain, with the role of lamaism, with the woman question in China. When I've finished my novel, I used to tell myself, I'll go into such and such a subject that seems really interesting; didn't get around to it.[14]

Döblin's novel attests to his extraordinary ability to absorb names

and ideas and impressions and transmute them into literature. The Afterword to the modern German edition of *Wang Lun* describes how he worked:

> His immersion in the Chinese world is reflected in the partially preserved notes of his readings in the relevant literature, recorded in pencil, indelible pencil or ink on multifarious sheets of paper, sometimes even on torn off hospital or library slips, or on envelopes. Döblin took notes, pedantically enough, of animals, plants, precious stones, landscapes, towns, usages of the Confucian religion, priests' clothing, ritual objects, civil and military costume, dances, games, musical instruments, medicines, technical expressions from the medical and military spheres. He excerpted descriptions of temples and festivals, religious customs and ideas, noted details of the political administration of provinces, of offices and titles, academic examinations and ranks, of eunuchs at the Emperor's court. We even have a collection of little maps, copied out in ink. Historical and geographical works, individual numbers of orientalist and ethnographic journals as sources for theatrical productions, weapons etc. are named or noticed. One four-page document contains nothing but columns of Chinese personal names, another proverbs, a third sayings from Laotzu, together with quotations from Li Po, Chuangtzu and other Chinese classics. On another sheet we find the poem written by Ch'ien-lung on a teacup and the poem by Tu Fu quoted in Book Three. From an unknown source he excerpted descriptions, complete with sketch plans, of Imperial costume and of the monastery town of Tashilunpo, residence of the Dalai Lama. Döblin collected much more than he eventually used.…[15]

He was not just adding local colour to a work of fantasy. "So much of the Orient has been assimilated in Döblin's art," writes the only Chinese critic to have studied the novel in depth, "that no clear boundary can be drawn between his sinological learning and his poetic imagination."[16] The book brings to vivid life an alien imagined world—China, the Flowering Middle—during the reign of Ch'ien-lung (1760–1799), one of its greatest emperors. The uprising of the historical Wang Lun in 1774, an obscure episode that Döblin found in de Groot's *Sectarianism and Religious Persecution in China*, provided only the germ for this story of a fictional Wang Lun, this working out of a problem of meekness against force, spiritual yearning against material existence, a mystical sense of the world

against the realities of power. Today the truths which motivate the novel can still shake empires.

Rebellions were endemic in North China. Some were political, seeking the overthrow of the ruling dynasty, others had a religious, millenarian origin. The reigns of Ch'ien-lung and his son Chia-ch'ing in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries saw periodic sectarian uprisings which displayed both patriotic anti-Manchu sentiment and strong millenarian tendencies. Any sect professing unorthodox beliefs came under State suspicion and risked violent suppression, even if not obviously subversive. The Wu-wei sect, the model for the "Truly Powerless", set tablets to the Emperor in its meeting places, but was still persecuted by the Ming (1368–1644) and proscribed in the Ch'ing (1644–1911).[17]

The teachings of this sect, expounded by the prophet Lo Huai (1563–1647) and recalled by an aged sectarian early in Book Four, drew on both the ancient tradition of the *Tao Te Ching* and the Buddhist idea of Nirvana. The sect had no saints or deities, no priests or temples, sought perfection and bliss solely in "words of truth uttered by heaven and earth".[18] They did not proselytize, called one another Brother and Sister.

By its nature the Wu-wei sect was not inclined to political action. Quite otherwise the White Lotus sects, or Pailien-chiao, whose protection the Wang Lun of the novel seeks at the end of Book One. These were salvationist and Messianic movements that became widespread in the sixteenth century, but whose origins can perhaps be traced back a thousand years earlier, to a Buddhist group that cultivated religious perfection in order to reach the Western Paradise. The sect was active in resistance to the Mongol Yüan dynasty (1280–1368), proclaiming the outbreak of great disturbances and the coming of Maitreya, the Future Buddha. The founder of the Ming, Chu Yuan-chang, was helped to his throne by the White Lotus (a legend is told of him in Book Four), but at the end of his reign included even this sect in his severe measures

against Buddhists, Taoists and other "exotic" religions. Suppression led to disturbances in the late Ming, but for the first century of the alien Ch'ing dynasty the sect busied itself with sutra reading and other devotional activities rather than rebellion. Then in 1774, with the uprising of Wang Lun, millenarian tendencies again erupted which were to continue sporadically throughout the nineteenth century, one strand evolving into the Boxer movement and the secret societies that helped Sun Yat-sen to topple the Ch'ing dynasty.

The historical Wang Lun was a short, stocky martial arts adept from western Shantung, who taught therapeutic yoga and meditation as well as boxing, and became regarded by his disciples as a White Lotus sect teacher.[19] His 26 direct pupils had pupils of their own, totalling perhaps two or three hundred; they included a travelling actress, peddlars, Buddhist monks, minor yamen employees, possibly salt smugglers. The actress (a detail unknown to Döblin but in keeping with the atmosphere of the novel) was a pretty and accomplished acrobat, who was cured by Wang Lun of a skin infection. Widowed, she was taken by Wang as his "daughter", mistress in fact; later she brought a dozen women, former associates, into the movement. (During the rebels' final stand she put superstitious fear into the Imperial troops, whose bullets and arrows left her unscathed. Only when the soldiers fired the severed genitals of a captured rebel at her was she killed.) In 1771 Wang began to talk of "manifesting the Way" and to plot rebellion. His motivation is unclear: perhaps an Imperial tour of the district brought home the contrast between ruler and ruled; perhaps Government action from 1768 onwards against kindred sects, resulting in executions and banishments, led to a stark choice between rebellion or arrest. Millenarian preaching had its own dynamic, as vague predictions became ever more definite preparations for the arrival of the Future Buddha.

Forced to premature action by the leak of their plans, Wang and his followers rose in the autumn of 1774, attacking several towns in western Shantung before gathering in the city of Linch'ing, where Imperial troops besieged them. Within a month the rebels were

defeated, Wang dead. They had numbered just a few thousand. Other sectarian revolts occurred in 1786, 1796–1803, and 1813, the latter far more bloody and widespread.

The empire under Ch'ien-lung was larger and stronger than it had ever been. The learned, energetic Emperor—poet, patron of scholars, lover of the hunt—had done his duty to Heaven and his ancestors. Sinkiang had been conquered by the ruthless Chao Hui; Tibet was under Chinese control. But the Wang Lun uprising was a portent of the long decay that would last until 1911, and the Panchen Lama's death from smallpox, during a visit to Peking of great significance, also rattled the Imperial government. Chao Hui, in the novel the prime instigator of violence, actually died ten years before Wang Lun's hopeless venture, and the Panchen Lama's fatal visit, described in such vivid, tender, horrific terms in Book Three, actually occurred six years later. Poetic licence allows the novel to draw from these events a coherent theme: the theme of earthly power against the power of the Way.

Döblin gave an account of his conception of *Wang Lun* in a 1929 essay, "The Structure of the Epic Work".[20] "I have it in mind, for example," he wrote,

> to depict a revolutionary ferment in a population, and as a start a harshly lit scene urges itself on me, an attack on a high official, a night scene. This is then felt entirely as an introduction, a kind of muffled drumroll, a single sharp report, then silence. Each individual point is fully worked out from the character of this violent, eerie prelude.... I began a Chinese novel with just such a drumbeat and just such a muffled roll of subterranean revolution.

The German reader finds this passage puzzling, for the introductory scene outlined here was dropped from the first edition of the novel and has never been restored.[21] Yet years later Döblin saw it as the indispensable starting point for the structure and the dynamic of the whole work. Why was it dropped? How does its absence affect the novel?

The scene, included here as the Prologue, sets the theme firmly in a political context. The attack on Chao Lao-hsü is a political act; its consequence—the conspiring of civil and military authorities in further extortions on the population—provides specific cause for the rebellion of the downtrodden.

Without this episode the theme is deflected into that generalized religious attitude, divorced from any particular social or political context, which is expressed early in Book One in the fable of the man and his shadow, and carried to its ghastly end with the fate of the Broken Melon in Book Two.

Not only the theme is affected; the shape of the book suffers. The novel ends with Hai-t'ang on a pilgrimage to the shrine of the goddess Kuan-yin, seeking peace for the loss of her two children in the upheavals—a direct result of the deal with which her husband Chao Hui has tried to preserve his power in the world. In the published version, lacking the Prologue, this scene is arbitrary; the story stops, but it is not an ending. In the novel as written the end harks back to the beginning, poses again the problem with which the tragedy began, and so provides a satisfying close. (Formally, the introduction is a *hsieh-tzu*, the prefatory episode of a Chinese play or story[22]—further evidence of Döblin's immersion in things Chinese.)

We do not know why Döblin agreed to cut this scene. He had tried for nearly two years to find a publisher, and perhaps was ready to accept a suggestion (made, it is said, by Martin Buber[23]) which improved the chances of acceptance. It was a bad decision, and not the last time Döblin would have difficulties with German publishers.

This initial scene must be followed by action on a gigantic scale, the essay continues,

> or else the proportions do not tally, and a particular dynamic is called for. I must begin slow and broad, perhaps with one character, in order to develop a massive crescendo. The proportions and the dynamic, these formative tendencies, are quite palpably felt, and now as imagination gets to work tirelessly hauling up material it is this formal law of broad, slow impetus which issues the directives.

This abstract, symphonic structure then begins to be filled. "A start is

made, for purely formal, I should say musical, reasons with a report on one man, a report which I spin out, and this man must become the red thread to which other threads attach themselves." That man is Wang Lun. "Report" is an inadequate word for the marvellous depiction of this rogue, first in his home village with a father who develops talents as a shaman, then in the city, where his cunning is trapped by the greater cunning of the sly priest To Chin.[24] "I group around him character after character, urge him on to actions so that more and more people gather round him, and so I make him the hero," writes Döblin. The crucial act is Wang's murder of a captain who has slain an innocent man. This is the first time Wang has acted for love of another, and it leads him not only to the mountains, but for the first time to a moral questioning.

"A man struggling vainly, powerless against power: a weak hero, truly powerless." Thus Döblin states his epic theme. In the mountains Wang encounters wretched outcasts, among them a runaway monk, Ma No, whose crystal Buddhas speak to Wang's awakening conscience. Able now to articulate the plight of the outcasts he becomes their leader, preaching hope for them in the Western Paradise if they cease railing against fate, become Wu-wei, "Truly Powerless". Thousands throng to join this new sect. Wang, concerned for their safety, leaves to seek support from the brotherhood of the White Waterlily.

In his absence Ma No is thrust into the leadership, and makes fateful changes which lead at the end of Book Two to the destruction of his breakaway sect, the Broken Melon: destruction at the hands of Wang Lun, who cannot bear that they should be massacred by Imperial troops. Now, as in a symphony, contrasts are required. "I change my vantage point," continues Döblin. "The revolutionary ferment in the land has reached a terrible level. The scenes are already coloured unbearably bright. Quiet, solemn tones are called for." Wang Lun vanishes. "I have no use for my hero now. I have him make an about-turn, he leaves his sect." The focus in Book Three turns to the Emperor and his guest the Panchen Lama:

> Characters and events must be found for these quiet, solemn tones. The Tibetan pope

> presents himself, a quite different, austere scenery is sought and depicted, monasteries, the icy land of Tibet and the stately train of the pope towards China and the great Manchu emperor. This structure underpins all the details of the episode. It provides the ground plan.

This "ground plan" is filled with vivid depictions, not only of austere Tibetan scenery but also of Peking, rife with plots and witchcraft. Though Book Three is set in a very different milieu, the events surrounding the Broken Melon in Book Two are central to it, and there are numerous parallels in the two Books. The Emperor seeks the meaning of the unrest in his realm from the great wise Panchen Lama, the living spirit of Wu-wei. Though deeply disturbed by the Lama's teaching, Ch'ien-lung is unwilling to escape the trap of his position, and after the Lama's death self-doubt and sorcery bring about the Emperor's near suicide. The Emperor and Ma No are both trapped in their self-centredness. Both seek immortality regardless of others, Ch'ien-lung in the gaze of his ancestors, Ma in the Western Paradise.

The *Three Leaps of Wang Lun* grew from a fundamental spiritual experience, a symphonic conception of epic fiction and a matchless imagination. With the possible exception of Flaubert and his recreation of pagan Carthage in *Salammbô*, never had a European writer more convincingly depicted an alien world in its own terms.

For all the vigour and narrative drive of individual episodes, the action of the novel often seems fragmentary, its chronology and motivation not always clear. The allegory of Wang Lun's three leaps across a brook just before the end helps to provide a focus. The first leap is Wang's spiritual awakening in the Nank'ou mountains, which leads to the founding of the outcast sect and its disastrous progress under Ma No. With the second leap Wang, who has turned his back on the movement and retired full of self-blame to the south and a domestic life, takes up the sword again, in political alliance with the White Waterlily. But his struggle is not just a political one. His third leap, following his encounter with the depraved and wretched

robber that he, but for Wu-wei, might have become, leads him again to the meaning he found on Nank'ou. But this time he knows that fate will allow the sect only one way out.

The leaps are not simply from violence to quiescence and back to violence.[25] Rather they symbolize a complex of transitions. "Who tries to conquer the world by action will fail. The world is of the spirit; it should not be disturbed. Who acts, loses it," says the *Tao Te Ching*. But the world of men allows no simple scheme in which action is bad, inaction good, and this is the central tragedy worked out in the novel. Failure to see the complexity posed by Döblin—oppositions not only of action and inaction but of selfishness and compassion, the individual and the community, rage against fate and acceptance of fate—can lead to misreadings. For example, is Ma No, the failed priest through whom Wang Lun first discovers the healing power of Buddha, a truer representative of Wu-wei than Wang himself? Wang goes at the end of Book One to seek an alliance with violent men. Ma No by contrast does not lift a finger against attacks by bandits and troops. Should he not be the hero?[26]

Of course he cannot be. His inaction and passivity are rooted in selfishness, in lust, in exploitation. He leads his breakaway sectarians in an orgy, plunging them deep into the fever of existence from which Wang had sought to extricate them. The conspirators of the White Waterlily from whom Wang seeks help are conscious volunteers in a dangerous game. But Ma No, coldly calculating, obtains protection against Imperial troops behind a living wall of peasants, innocent townsfolk. Wang Lun's first leap takes him from vengeful isolation in his own misery to a sense of shared humanity, a profound compassion for his fellow outcasts. Ma No makes no such leap. The change from celibate vagrant to "king" of his doomed followers does not release him from his egotism, merely gives it greater scope. At the dreadful end of Book Two he reaches the Western Paradise not in bliss but in rage and horror. He has failed utterly to comprehend Wang's teaching.

Parables also help to crystallize the theme. The man in the first parable, at the start of Book One, could have freed himself of his

anxieties simply by resting in the shade of a tree, by merging with the powers of nature, accepting his fate. The problem for Wang and his followers, as old Chu so eloquently explains in the hut on Nank'ou, is that Nature and Fate are not the only powers they must contend with. Some men, the powerful of society, usurp the role of these impersonal forces, fling themselves like natural disasters over the wretched land. "It was not granted to us to be Truly Powerless," says Wang near the end. A Truly Powerless in a world where men set upon other men like wolves and tigers can only be a suicide. He fears that his first leap was a mistake, which has led to disaster those he meant to help.

What redeems Wang is his compassion, as the parable in Book Four, of the peasant wife who importunes Buddha, makes clear. "Woman, you did not want to help your husband and yourself," Buddha scolds her before banishing her to the abyss. She has thought only of herself, tried like Ch'ien-lung and Ma No to determine her own fate. With his first leap Wang discovers his humanity; but for that he would have ended souldead and depraved like the robber brought to him for judgement in Tungch'ang; would not have created a community out of those once isolated in their misery.

The brook Wang leaps across he calls the Nai-ho, the Chinese Styx, whose name means literally, "There is no other way." His third leap is towards armed revolt and death: death as a merging with the Way, not a martyrdom whose goal is immortality for one's own self. Wang knows that talk of a Ming restoration is pure fantasy; he knows too that the State will never tolerate his heretical teaching. There is no other way for him but to help the tragedy to its end. His dream, just before the final slaughter, of the sycamore tree whose "inexhaustible growth" gives delight to those who pass, eases the bitterness of that end.

The outline is grim, and there are many grim and horrifying scenes. But Döblin's novel is remarkable for the variety of moods, the density and depth with which a teeming alien society is evoked:

landscapes and city streets, low life in Chinan-fu and the splendours of the Imperial City, biographical vignettes of the most eccentric individuals and crowd scenes where individuals become mere physical forces or objects. There are episodes of great humour, of pathos, of skulduggery and witchcraft. Word and phrase and image, with great economy, make scene after scene almost palpable. The language is by turns harsh, lyrical, jagged, supple; the narrative, so "modern" in its disjointed chronology, ironical objectivity and abrupt transitions, only rarely fails to engage attention. "Without the Futurist elements of Döblin's work from *Wang Lun* to *Berlin Alexanderplatz*," writes Günter Grass,[27] "my prose is inconceivable."

The imagery dissolves boundaries between man and the natural world. Rebellion is a disorder in the body of China, a "rheumatic discomfort in the arm, in the shoulder, over the feet, painful stabbing in a tooth, throbbing nerve above the left eye." Trees suppress frantic laughter, watercourses in a drought are empty intestines. The sea looks balefully from rheumy eyes; men fight oblivious of "snorting and maneshaking grunts in the sky, the baring of teeth, whipping of tails" as a thunderstorm gathers. Many images are disturbingly visceral. The syntax, adopting some of Marinetti's precepts, makes mini mal use of conjunctions; phrases are linked by commas, words chosen for their energy. At key points, especially in scenes of violence, the prose is as stark and verbless as Chinese poetry: "Breathless calm. Open stage. Screams from the trussed-up sisters, stripping of tender bodies, clubs ringing on the skulls of brothers, roaring, trampling horses, timid whimpering of the sick, empty plain, rain."

Dissolved too are the boundaries between speech and narrative. Whole conversations are given in indirect speech, and Döblin switches within a paragraph, even within a sentence, from mode to mode: "There had been a change since the mountains of Nank'ou: Wang Lun, the tall, dangerous fellow from Hunkang-ts'un has told amazing things of the golden Fo's, he'll help us, he knows magic, we're going along with him. Now the crowd preached for itself."—"The niece … suggested when they should run away. If only

they didn't have a good thrashing waiting for them at home. What if they were kicked out or sold. Chu saw her as she passed by …" External description merges with interior delirium: "Deep inside he was jealous of this guest who came out so casually with such a monstrous, unheard-of plan … He cursed Wang at length, lying on the prayer mat in front of the shelf, for Amithaba to hear: what wicked things that man had said, and how he was now controlling himself, suppressing himself, taking refuge in the Law, in the Teaching, in the great pious Fellowship, as the formula ran. He focussed, murmuring the name A-mi-to-fo without stopping, went over himself in rapture like a cat stalking over a path; he saw the path snaking thinly away, a thread that pulled him, over the first rises, then over the four steps of blessedness. Now caught by the current, now turning back, now never turning back, now Arhat, Lohan, sinless worthy regarding with the same eye gold and clay, catalpa and mimosa, sandalwood and the axe that will fell it.…"

Amidst these alien landscapes the narrator injects from time to time a reminder that he is, after all, just a historian: "What else happened on the evening of this day in the Forbidden City is not known in detail."—"Many myths evolved later around this journey of five simple brothers to the Lower Reaches."—"This festival has been described many times; poems were composed about it; even Ch'ien-lung alluded to it in some later verses. Almost everything we have is a phantastical distortion of the event." This is, of course, an ironical ploy. Irony is a subtle but constant element throughout the book. The fate of the misfits and the downtrodden who constitute the sect, detailed in a succession of ironical vignettes, is summed up in Book Two: "There is no need to report how she and others fared there. They did not find what they sought, and realized at last that they had achieved everything imaginable. None of their wishes was fulfilled; they were divested of every wish." The perversity of the kingdom founded by Ma No becomes clear in the story of Nung and his beloved, condemned for their faithfulness by a society where all must belong to all.

Chinese, Tibetan and Buddhist expressions are introduced without

explanation. This heightens the novel's air of strangeness, but conceals the depth of Döblin's study and cannot avoid alienating the reader to some degree. For the German reader, familiarity with the Orient may not help in elucidating the meaning of many such terms, whose spelling reflects the free-for-all of 19th century romanisation, exacerbated by misreadings from the manuscript (e.g. "Schim-mong" for "Schen-nung" = Shen Nung; "juch-kin" for "jueh-kin" = yüeh-ch'in).[28] Sometimes Döblin simply made mistakes in his references. Wherever possible in the translation the original expression has been identified. Chinese terms have been converted to the Wade-Giles romanisation, though well-known place names have retained familiar spellings. Some obvious errors have been silently emended, as when a festival described in Book Two is named Ch'ing-ming when the context requires the Yü-lan festival; or references to the "(Yellow) Sand River" when the Yangtze rather than the Yellow River is intended. The geography of Tibet, however, has been left as Döblin gives it.

"I see myself," wrote Döblin,

> placed in front of a picture, shoved into landscapes and situations that emerged in me—I cannot say I thought them up or invented them. I could neither summon these phantasies, nor protect myself from them.… I never sat alone at my desk. I was always surrounded by a great company: of words, of language, dressed in a kind of spirit clothing … I never began writing until the ideas had reached a certain ripeness, and this occurred when they began to clothe themselves in words. Having obtained this image I set out with it in my pilot boat, out of the harbour, and there I would see a great ship which I would board and sail away and be in my element; voyaged and made discoveries and only months later returned home …[29]

After *Wang Lun* such voyages took Döblin to the Germany of the Thirty Years' War (*Wallenstein*); to the distant future (*Berge Meere und Giganten*); to India (*Manas*, a poetic epic); and to his own home town (*Berlin Alexanderplatz*[30]). During the Weimar Republic he wrote prolifically for newspapers and journals, and was a prickly

disputant in the hothouse politics of the time. Later, exiled from Hitler's Germany, he imagined the cities of Europe through the eyes of the ancient god Marduk (*Babylonische Wanderung*), the Paraguay of the Jesuits (*Amazonas*), and the failed German revolution (*November 1918*[31]). Through all these diverse settings Döblin continued to work out, on an epic scale, his theme of man and his existence in the world. At bottom, says Muschg, "he was a moralist, an ever-sceptical seeker after truth who scorned all merely aesthetic beauty and who asserted in a challenging way the social, political, and moral responsibility of the writer."[32]

Twice Döblin had to flee into exile: in 1933, one day ahead of a Nazi arrest warrant (his Jewishness naturally aggravated by his "degenerate art"), to Zürich and then to Paris, where he was granted French citizenship. In 1940, aged 62, he was uprooted again by the German invasion and spent arduous months as a refugee before finally reaching the United States, where he worked for a year in a Hollywood film studio alongside many other famous exiles.[33] The former sceptic experienced a religious conversion at this period, and became a Roman Catholic. After the War he returned to Germany in the uniform of a French officer, and tried with little success to help in the recovery from the spiritual and cultural cataclysm that his former countrymen had brought on themselves. The German public remembered him as the mocking iconoclast of the twenties, and showed no interest in Döblin the moralist. The works of his exile, published in Germany for the first time between 1946 and 1950, were barely noticed. His last novel, *Hamlet, oder die lange Nacht nimmt ein Ende*, completed in 1946, was finally published in East Berlin in 1955, with great success, after repeated rejections in West Germany. Döblin died in 1957, then as now the least known of the century's great German writers. In Günter Grass' words, "He'll discomfort you, give you bad dreams. He's hard to digest. The reader will be changed by him. If you're satisfied with yourself, beware of Döblin."[34]

NOTES

Though, as Günter Grass remarks, Döblin occasions no congresses and seldom attracts the zeal of the Germanists, in recent years there have been some detailed studies. The following were particularly useful in the preparation of the Introduction:

Armin Arnold, *Die Literatur des Expressionismus: sprachliche und thematische Quellen* (The Literature of Expressionism: Linguistic and Thematic Sources), Stuttgart, 1966. A lively account, though Arnold's judgements are sometimes questionable.

Juliet Bredon, *Peking* (1919; reprinted by Oxford University Press in 1982), was invaluable in identifying many of the places mentioned in the text.

Dscheng Fang-hsiung, *Alfred Döblins Roman, "Die Drei Sprünge des Wang Lun" als Spiegel des Interesses moderner deutscher Autoren an China* (AD's novel "The Three Leaps of Wang Lun" as a reflection of the interest of modern German authors in China), Frankfurt, 1979. Dscheng sets *Wang Lun* in the context of a German response to China which he finds more spiritually profound than the response of French or English writers. More importantly, he reveals for the first time just how true Döblin's imagination was to the deeper meaning of the Chinese works he read. Some of the same ground is covered, rather less thoroughly, in Ingrid Schuster, *China & Japan in der deutschen Literatur 1890–1925*, Bern, 1977.

Otto Keller, *Döblins Montageroman als Epos der Moderne* (AD's montagenovel as the epic of the modern), Munich, 1980. A detailed study from a psychoanalytical perspective.

Leo Kreutzer, *Alfred Döblin: sein Werk bis 1933* (AD, his work up to 1933), Stuttgart, 1970. A dependable and judicious account of Döblin's early life and work.

Matthias Prangel, *Alfred Döblin* (Stuttgart, 1973). A bibliography interspersed with useful biographical details.

I wish to thank Professor Anthony Tatlow and Dr Herbert Pierson for help in locating some of these reference materials.

1. The first German paperback edition was published in 1970, with a second printing in 1980. Both printings together reached 25,000 copies. The only translations of *Wang Lun* up to now have been into Danish (1926) and French (1932). Plans for an English version while Döblin was in exile in America in the 1940s came to nought.
2. Döblin, "Arzt und Dichter" (Doctor and Writer), 1927, in *Autobiographische Schriften und letzte Aufzeichnungen* (Autobiographical Writings and Last Sketches), p. 26.
3. Ibid., p. 25.
4. Döblin, *Schicksalsreise* (Fateful Journey) 1949 (reprinted in Munich, 1986), p. 109.
5. Quoted in Arnold, op. cit., pp. 22–25.
6. Döblin, "An Romanautoren und ihre Kritiker" (Berliner Programm) (To novelists and their critics: the "Berlin Programme") in *Der Sturm*, Vol. 4 (1913).
7. Döblin, "Epilog" (1948), in *Autobiographische Schriften*, p. 441.
8. Döblin (1927), quoted in Kreutzer, op. cit., p. 39. The term "Expressionist" was not used of themselves by any of the major writers who were later so labelled. It was mostly the group around *Der Sturm* with their programmes and manifestos who proclaimed themselves Expressionists.
9. Arnold, op. cit., p. 84.
10. Helmut Koopmann, "Alfred Döblin: 'Die Drei Sprünge des Wang Lun' in neuer Sicht". (A new look at AD's "Three Leaps of Wang Lun", unpublished essay.)
11. Döblin, "Aufsätze zur Literatur" (Essays on Literature), p. 338.
12. Martin Buber, *Die Reden und Gleichnisse des Tschuang-tse*, 1910; Richard Wilhelm, *Tao-te-ching*, 1911; *Dschuang Dsi*, 1912; and *Liä Dsi, das wahre Buch vom quellenden Urgrund*, 1912.

13. Döblin, *Schicksalsreise*, p. 109.
14. Döblin, “Aufsätze zur Literatur”, p. 338.
15. Walter Muschg, *Afterword* to the modern German edition of *Wang Lun*.
16. Dscheng, op. cit., p. 142.
17. Samuel Cooling, *Encyclopedia Sinica* (Shanghai, 1917; reprinted in Hong Kong, Oxford University Press, 1983): article on Wu-wei.
18. J. J. M. de Groot, *Sectarianism and Religious Persecution in China* (Leiden, 1901; reprinted in Taipei: Ch’eng Wen Publishing Co., 1970), Vol. 1, p. 185.
19. The details are taken from Susan Naquin, *Shantung Rebellion: the Wang Lun Uprising of 1774* (Yale University Press, 1981). Döblin’s source was de Groot, pp. 296 ff.
20. Döblin, “Der Bau des epischen Werks”, in “Aufsätze zur Literatur”, pp. 123–25.
21. It was first published as a short story in the magazine *Genius* in 1921.
22. Dscheng, op. cit., p. 144.
23. Reported in Kreutzer, op. cit., p. 179.
24. Schuster, op. cit., p. 216, notes that the tricks by which T’o Chin catches Wang were adopted by Brecht in his play *Man is Man*.
25. What follows draws on Keller, op. cit., pp. 59–140.
26. This misreading is found in Ernst Ribbat, *Die Wahrheit des Lebens im frühen Werk A Döblins* (Truth to life in AD’s early work), Münster, 1970, pp. 126–27; and in Francis Lide, “The Episode of the Three Leaps in Alfred Döblin’s *Wang Lun*”, in *Studies in German* (Rice University, 1969), p. 144.
27. Günter Grass, “Uber meinen Lehrer Alfred Döblin” (My teacher AD), in *Akzente* 14 (1967), No. 4.
28. Mistranscriptions dogged Döblin to the end. His last book,

Hamlet, for example, refers to a "Wilahwie Boulevard" in Los Angeles—clearly enough a misreading of a handwritten "Wilshire". The recent French translation does not bother to correct it.

29. Alfred Döblin, *Schicksalsreise*, p. 113.
30. English translation by Eugene Jolas, 1931.
31. English translation by John E. Woods, *A People Betrayed and Kart* and *Rosa* (London: Angel Books, 1983 and 1988).
32. Walter Muschg, "Alfred Döblin Heute", in *Text + Kritik 13/14* (Munich: Richard Boorberg Verlag, 1972).
33. The sad and sometimes comical story of Germany's Hollywood émigrés (a cross-cultural enterprise almost as notable as *Wang Lun*) is told in John Russell Taylor's *Strangers in Paradise* (London, 1983). Döblin worked on *Mrs Miniver* and *Random Harvest*, but it is unlikely that any of his work saw the screen.
34. Grass, op. cit.

Postscript: How I Came to Translate *Wang Lun*

I came upon a slim volume of stories titled *Der Uberfall auf Chao-Lao-Hsu* at a railway bookstall in Austria in the late 1980s. At that time the author's name was known to me only for *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, and that only from Fassbinder's 1980 TV adaptation. The Chinoiserie of the title intrigued me, and I started reading as we travelled through the mountains. At the next opportunity I prospected for more Döblin, and at once found his other Chinese title: *Die drei Sprünge des Wang Lun*.

At that time my days were spent drafting government policy documents in Hong Kong. To shape an argument and distill conflicting views is a craft not without satisfactions, but who would read what I wrote ten years, five years, even one year down the line? The vigour and imagination of Döblin's prose prompted the thought: since no one has translated this work into English in the six

decades since it was published, why should a British bureaucrat who knows both German and Chinese not try his hand?

To set the project going I acquired my first computer, a secondhand Apple II with no hard drive, and a dot matrix printer. For the next two years many evenings and weekends juggled child-minding with Döblin. As I became familiar with his prose style and the often enigmatic Chinese references (enigmatic, until I twigged that mistranscription was often the culprit), I explored Hong Kong University library's sparse but useful holdings relating to Döblin, his critical reception, and the historical and geographical background to *Wang Lun*. At some point it dawned on me that the Chao-Lao-Hsu episode was integral to the novel, though excised by Döblin for obscure reasons and never reprinted with it in Germany. I thought that a mere translator would be amply justified in restoring it.

Twenty years on, I still see *Wang Lun* as a neglected classic of European literature: an almost miraculous invocation of a vanished world by a German who never visited China and never studied Chinese, but whose spongelike mind could absorb the most disparate facts and images and shape them into a coherent symphonic creation. In the quarter century following *Wang Lun*, Döblin applied his vision and artistry to create half a dozen more epic novels, ranging in time from the Thirty Years War to the distant future, and from a shabby quarter of Berlin to the South American jungle. Most remain unavailable in English, and even where available, almost unknown. May this new edition of *Wang Lun* help to stimulate a long overdue interest in Döblin in the English-speaking world.

Chris Godwin

Stroud, U.K.

April 2014

Dedication

Lest I forget …

A soft whistling from the street below. Metallic motion, humming, rustling. Striking against my pen of bone.

Lest I forget …

But what?

I must close the window.

The streets have acquired strange voices these last few years. Mildew has spread beneath the stones; from every pole glass bowls a yard across dangle, grumbling metal plates, echoswilling drainpipes. A booming, jumbled roar of wood, mammoth jaws, compressed air, rubble. Electric flutesounds railgliding. Cars wheezing motors sail on their sides over the asphalt; my doors rattle. Milkwhite arc lamps spatter massive rays against my panes, tip wagonloads of light into my room.

I do not reproach this maddening vibration. Only I cannot see my way into it.

I do not know whose voices there are, whose souls feed this thousand-tonned vault of resonance.

This heavenly doveflight of aeroplanes.

These fluepipes coiling through the ground.

This flashing of words across a hundred miles.

Who benefits?

Yet I know these people on the pavements. Their telegraphs are new. The grimaces of avarice, the hostile satiety of a blueshaven chin, the thin snooping nose of lechery, the coarseness with its heart doll-like in jellied blood, watery dogeyes of envy, their throats have yelped their way down the centuries and filled them with—progress.

Oh, I know that. I sleeked by the wind.

Lest I forget …

In this Earth's life two thousand years are as one year.

Winning, conquering … An old man said, "We go, and know not whither. We stay, and know not where. We eat, and know not why. All this is the mighty vital force of Heaven and Earth. Who can here speak of winning, possessing?

I shall sacrifice to him behind my window, to this wise old man

Lieh-tzu

with this impuissant book.

Prologue

The Attack on Chao Lao-hsü

Darkly the ridges of the Hsi-shan marched inland from the coast. A long way from the golden coast rose the mass of the Tu-shan, only reluctantly, as if they might desert it, leaving the flowerstrewn hills to lie beside the yellow-grey water. In the bright air lines shimmered beyond and above the mountains. They were the peaks of the Pien-wai; they were oscillations, resembling the eyebrows of a woman.

It was evening on the Gulf of Pei-Chihli.

The sea beat higher and brighter on the rocky shore. The warm turbid waves carved grooves in the sand around the little junks on the beach. During long harsh hours the sun's rays had lashed the water; now they rebounded. The sea had covered itself in an armour which, it is said, is the back of the P'eng bird. When the P'eng rises up and flies to the southern seas, his scaly body stretches millions of miles and his gigantic wings are able to propel the clouds. A soft haze glided over the surface, gathered loose and thick like cotton wool. The sun's rays draped themselves in loose folds of mist. Moments before a round furnace in the sky had roared forth heat; now the fire was sintered over. A misty shade had suddenly been placed over the world. Things swelled into one another.

The shouts of the harbour workers came muffled from the Customs House. Beside the harbour lay the old town of Shanhaikwan. House shouldered house. Low broad mud huts in narrow alleys, slender wooden structures, ponderous warehouses and pawnshops, a few brightly painted temples, memorial arches, government yamens.

The streets grew quieter as darkness gathered. Mist fell like a

wedge between the passers by, the merchants, peddlars, street hawkers. In the Oxmarket, a wide space in Tso-fu Street, fat glossy beasts lowed and flicked their tails at the bluebottles that flew up from the hoof high dung. The drovers, five of them, sat in a shabby teashop. Fat Chang squatted crosslegged outside by the door, on the ground. He strummed a bigbellied mandolin, a yüeh-ch'in, they sang the response, a coarse peasant song. Two old knife grinders were making their way up the long street. Their little barrows scarcely rattled in the soft muck. On a street they simultaneously took the ching-kuei from around their necks, the Maidens' Terror, brass plates five spans wide threaded on a string. They pulled the wooden handle; a jangling like shattered panes. The elder whistled mournfully and stood on one leg. He had a blue cloth tied over his right ear. They walked on opposite sides along the housefronts, cocked their ears, came back. Then they pushed their barrows onwards, trailing behind a water cart. They shouted a few words to the water carrier but he did not turn round. At the Oxmarket they stopped. The grinders upended their barrows. The water carrier stepped from the shafts, swinging his arms. He spat into his hands, rubbed them together. He stumped into the teas hop ahead of the others, joined in the peasant song loudly from the doorway.

The mist hung impenetrable from curving roofs. A light drizzle fell. From the eastern part of the town, the shop quarter, walking slowly through the streets came young Chao Lao-hsü and Han Yung-kuang. They held elegant gardenias, with which they pointed laughing. They told each other the thick mist was just the thing for flirting and catching girls. Delicate Lao-hsü, only son of General Chao Hui, walked in front with the dancing, springy, careful gait that jugglers use when they juggle on bamboo poles. He wore a bright blue damask undergarment, a dark overgown with the finest embroidery on the wide sleeves and shiny collar. There were lotus blossoms with dragoneyed fish, white flower stems that ended swelling in the goggle eyes of fish. His shoes were painted green and blue with thornapple blossom.

Lao-hsü turned from time to time to warn his friend of a puddle,

revealing to him a childish, fineformed face. It was not so strongly Manchu as Yung-kuang's: he had slanted, flickering eyes in a long face, cheekbones jutting out sharply, thin lips. It was more softly contoured, the eyes more rounded, but their laugh was the same: soft, trilling, beginning like a cough. They were still laughing about their sedan chairs, which were waiting in front of a shop in Wei-ai Street, while to the astonishment of the shopkeeper they climbed a ladder over the courtyard wall into the neighbouring yard through the shoemaker's workshop into a parallel street, merrily pulling and jostling each other. The mud in the streets was deep. The beautiful white felt of their shoes was soon brown. On their backs, on their queues crusts of mud stuck, thrown up by runners and carriers who appeared suddenly through the mist and ran frantically from them. But their pleasure was unclouded. If a shuffling of slippers, the tripping of a girl's feet made itself noticeable at a gate, at a window, behind a lattice, Lao-hsü would whip an inlaid dagger from his sleeve and spring forward.

He had bought it in a nearby town ten days before, when an itinerant Peking opera troupe was performing the old play "The Temple of the Eight Chao's". He had watched the pranks of Fei-te Kung, the ravisher of maidens, with delight. From his seat, to the terror of the women, he set off a rocket which he aimed right across the theatre, so that a general sneezing and spitting began. But during the prelude to the final scene, where the cocksure hero is robbed of his weapon by a crude female trick, he stood up noisily with his friend and pushed along the narrow row of benches out of the theatre, considered first whether it wasn't more appropriate to rob the bonze outside the theatre of an ornamental sword, then for a hundred taels and without bargaining bought his old inlaid sleeve dagger. "We shouldn't lower ourselves to the tradesman's level of these Chinese," he said to Yung-kuang, as without a word he handed the huge sum to the stupefied bonze. They teased him: he was holding the sword in his hand like a boy his new plaything. Again and again he laid it lovingly across both arms, showed and concealed fine engravings on the handle, wondered if he shouldn't

have it consecrated by a priest of Wu-ti, god of war.

They turned towards the poor western part of town, so as to arrive at the river and the flowerboats, and the pretty singing of pretty women.

They had scarcely stepped into Tso-fu Street when a broadshouldered Chinese by the wall of the ivory carvers' clubhouse looked them closely in the face. He had a carrying pole on his shoulder, sank back again to the wall. He followed them.

They walked faster. The rain was heavier now, and it was growing darker. Lao-hsü's merriment was increasing. He grabbed the hands of a serving girl who was on her way at this late hour to buy ointments from an old herb woman for her mistresses; no one was to know that these ladies obtained their rouge and ointments from a disreputable woman. The little thing, muffled up to the eyes, was so frightened she could not cry out or run away when a hand grasped her waist, a short sword danced in front of her face. The empty ointment jar dropped to the ground. Lao-hsü looked stern, like a policeman; he pulled her along, and Yung-kuang followed close behind grotesquely grimacing.

The coolie put his pole flat on the ground. He glided past them in the mist, in the darkness, knocked on a house door: three double knocks, then twice with the palm. A boy in a red cap opened it. Behind him stood a tall man, naked to the waist, scarred. As the coolie whispered to him he pulled over his thin arms with movements quick as lightning a long gown that was hanging at the hearth to dry. With great strides both were outside. They left the door open.

Finally Yung-kuang could go no farther for laughing. As Lao-hsü was explaining solemnly to the girl that in this time of unrest any Chinese who stuck his dirty nose outside the door after sunset without first plugging his nostrils was liable, according to a prefectural decree, to a summary sentence of three weeks in the cangue, two figures fell on them out of the gloom, hit them over the head with wooden clubs, threw them to the ground, chased away the girl. They cut off their queues with short knives, removed their

shoes, ripped from their gowns the embroidered insignia showing membership of the eight Manchu Banners. They dragged the two boys, senseless in the churned up filth of the street, into the doorway of a ruined house and propped them against the half open door. On the foreheads of the two motionless youths they drew in mud the sign of the five evil demons. Lao-hsü's bloody head lolled all the while on his left shoulder. They shoved his arms together and laid the magnificent sleeve dagger across them. Hu, the tall man, strode across the Oxmarket to the teahouse. The two old knife grinders came back sleepily with him; they smiled and rocked their heads. Three melon sellers and a salt boiler jostled for a look. They exchanged greetings, sighed. The salt boiler spat on the still body with the sleeve dagger. The coolie, an old, serious face, fingered the long, gaping wound on Lao-hsü's head, then rested the lolling skull on his left arm as he knelt beside the boy and with quivering lips poured a healing draught from a little gourd flask that had stood for a hundred sutras on an altar table.

There was movement in the street. Muffled the night watchman's drum beat between the houses. They vanished behind the door. The young night watchman whistled a chirpy tune. The dull light from the round lantern that he carried before him on a long pole slid over the still bodies. Muffled his drum echoed across the wide market place.

The men behind the door separated, after the coolie had told them the name of his family and where he lived, and had invited them to honour him soon with a visit to his miserable hovel.

A fine rain was still falling. In the main streets the lamplighters went about, climbed their hand ladders and lit the oil lamps in front of the houses of the rich merchants, the doctors and midwives. Songs and gongbeats blared from many shops. A rumbling and distant thunder came from the Hsi-shan. Beyond the harbour where the dark warm sea stirred, strumming came from a little vegetable patch behind a fisherman's hut. The sound from the longnecked bottle-shaped p'ip'a was now loud, now carried scarcely ten paces. A man's uncertain highpitched voice sang in an unfathomable rhythm,

wandering among the same few notes:

The bat flits at the east gate.

The pale rain pours down on the plum trees. A shrill wind will soon rise.

Why does the squirrel seek sweet fruit

By night, while the pale rain pours down?

Old Chao Hui paced to the upper window of his house.

The second night watch was already past.

He had been waiting for young Lao-hsü.

The house stood alone behind the town on the northwestern Magnolia Slopes. In the darkness it stood out harshly, as narrow and tall as a lance. He had not built himself one of those miserable Manchu dwellings with flat roof and walls of mud, like his northern ancestors from the River of the Black Dragon. As General vested by the Emperor with a special commission and authority in a turbulent province he lived in splendour under the tall trunks of the elms and the whiterimmed spruce. Before him the tangle of alleys, the huge empty squares, the meandering streets feeling their way to the harbour. His house lay high enough to afford a view of the sea, if it were not for the triumphal arch at the end of Han-pen Street, that ancient edifice erected in the time of Chu Yuan-chang to commemorate some securing of the border against the Mongols. Four smooth pillars, straddled high up by broad crossbeams, supported stepped cornices. On each step crouched stone phoenixes; each beam bore reliefs and boastful inscriptions. Whoever passed through the wide central arch of the monumental p'ai-lou could read on every frieze about that grand old victory on the Northeast Frontier.

Chao Hui laughed as he looked. They rejoiced over that ancient victory—and wore shaven heads in their own land, the mark of the Manchu, despite the presence of their tutelary ancestors. Deeply embedded in the Chinese earth in front of the house two wooden flagpoles reared threateningly; from fine, ornately perforated flagbaskets hung white pennants with the insignia of the Banner

Lord. A low green wooden fence enclosed the house, whose two storeys, a red and gold upper floor over a bluewashed ground floor, were decked with an immense, overornate roof. Above the door, between two paper-covered windows an engraved tablet hung, with the inscription: Righteousness and the Pure Dynasty. The blind upper floor was painted gold and red, and was straddled by roof spars that flashed gold and red, the side beams ending in dragonheads. Monstrous lions squatted big as children on the balustrade around the upper floor. They snapped with twisted mouths, bit their long, itchy poodle ears, they growled and curled pointed tongues, they flopped lazily on their sides and nuzzled their fur.

And inside at the open balcony door lean, restless Chao Hui stood, lightly dressed in black, trying to penetrate the mist. Prized by his troops, his clan, an object of jealousy among the courtiers, the intriguing eunuchs. Here he was in this northern province, and knew he had been sent here to be got swiftly out of the way.

He had grown too big for them the day he was awarded the title Guardian of a Gate of Peking, the day the Emperor had come bearing a cup of tea to welcome him at the door of the Summer Palace. His glittering eyes darted over the walls of the room. The entire study was surrounded by a fantastic hunt. A broad relief carved in black wood covered the low walls. In the dim oil light figures flickered in ghostly life. Horses and carts, warriors between colossal wheels and targets as tall as horses. They continued from wall to wall with fluttering banners in uninterrupted procession, rode over a kneeling man who was touching a cloud-soaring Buddha's head. Demons like dragonflies flew round a tree. A yard-long phoenix swished down; behind it a groaning man swam with the tail and fins of a fish, trying to grab the phoenix; there was wave after wave of dragons and men and genies.

The terrible things of the last few years rose before him.

He had marched four times against the Dzungars, had helped to exterminate them. The Emperor granted every last man who took part in that bloodbath a homecoming; they had to go as settlers to

the New Frontier. Some thousands declined the opportunity. Chao Hui on the advice of the Emperor took them on as a standing army for the suppression of internal unrest.

These were the core of Chao Hui's troops, his horde: the incendiary ravagers of Ili. Now they were camped across the province of Chihli that seethed with rebellion. They were posted before the gates of the Northern Residence.

Rebellion was rippling through this province, through Shantung, across Liaotung, and the burrowing worm could not be crushed. It smouldered in many hundreds of villages and towns. And no enemy showed itself! His horde were yawning. His patrons in the Ministry, high officials in the Ping-pu, wanted him drowned here, as his estates had drowned in the Great River, down in the Lower Reaches. He wanted to hurl himself, a scourge, a violence, upon the unruly populace, teach them as they prayed to Buddha and read their sutras the religion of the halberd, the prayer of the long rod. They should all be burned to ashes.

The mist lay thick enough to cut on the black town. Sailors' songs rose from it like breathing. From the forest came the scream of a wild goose and the tumult of several geese squabbling. They quietened down; one continued scolding for a time.

The lean mandarin with the grey drooping moustache hunched in fury in his black silk gown. He wrenched the long chain of glass beads that he wore around his neck, threw it clattering across the table. It rolled and slid hesitantly to the floor. Mindful suddenly of the Son of Heaven he dropped to press his forehead to the floor.

He went to the gong that hung in a fourlegged stand near the southern wall of the room, rapped quickly with his knuckles twice. Tai-tsung, the old house slave, the "Little Father without a tongue", knelt in the doorway. The young folk had still not returned to the palace. He looked uncertainly beyond his lord, who stalked from balcony door to his low couch and from the couch to the balcony door. The mist had thickened very early; the young illuminary hadn't been long in this disreputable den of fisherfolk; might he have lost his way. The mandarin's laugh was like his son's:

beginning with a cough, then pealing, then a throaty cooing. “Do you intend to join a jugglers’ guild in this disreputable den of fisherfolk? Have you ever seen the streets of Liu-yu? A street goes over roofs, fences, walls, through yards and cellars. Within three days Lao-hsü had his bearings.”

Tai-tsung did not rise, raked his stringy beard, sighed and followed his lord with tragic eyes. “Will the favourite of Wu-ti not send after the young illuminary?”—“The flowerboats are an hour away,” and Chao Hui laughed again.

“I was so bold as to send to the flowerboats two hours ago, and ask. The resplendent Lao is not amusing himself there. He went into a shop in Wei-ai Street with the inestimable Yung-kuang. Their chairs came home without them. But they were in Tso-fu Street, in the dark. The young radiances were in very high spirits.”

“And went off to the flowerboats.”

“They aren’t at the flowerboats,” the old man murmured obstinately, picking the pacing general’s glass bead chain from the floor.

Chao stood in front of him, knocked him on the back of the head with his fist. “What do you want with me, you bag of shit? What are you doing down there?”—“It’s dangerous in the town, Excellency. He is the son of a righteous but severe general. He can’t come home. He is being held.”—“Out!” roared Chao Hui, his eyes flashing.

Half an hour later a quite unfamiliar sound hummed through the palace. Two soft deep gongbeats, very close to the house, ghostly, as if a great wounded bird had stroked the metal with its wings as it sank. It was the gong out in the northern side hall, placed there since the start of the troubles for public use in emergencies. Only in dangerous places and times did leading officials set up a public alarm gong before their yamens. Three servants—a cook and two sedan bearers—and the Little Father too ran at each other’s heels through the back door. Suddenly they stopped. To all of them at once came the fearful thought that it was not the house gong but the alarm gong, the northern one. As they stared at each other and ran about excitedly, two figures with paper lanterns were already

whispering in the hall, two of the general's people, barelegged, pointing animatedly at the damp ground between them. Nobody near the gong. No sign. Only a man's footprint, broadsoled, on the ground. A lengthy whispering began among the six in the windy hall. Anxiously they glanced about to see if the general was corning, but the house was quiet. He was sleeping. They stayed hidden in the shrubbery behind the northern gong.

The two bearers were already on their backs, the little old man with the white beard snored squatting, when a very soft, almost vibrationless note sounded, then a full plaintive beat. Something white was still falling under the gong as the first bearer ran up. Before he could look at it, old Tai-tsung grabbed it from his hand. On the paper were the words: Tso-fu Street. Beneath them the characters for Sun and Moon: the sign of the rebels. In all stealth they woke Chao Hui's twenty bodyguards in the rear apartments. Silently, barefoot, halberds in hand, they raced down into the black town. Before them four lanterns swayed on long bamboo poles.

Now and then water splashed as they ran through puddles. The wooden drums of the night watchmen sounded now near, now farther off. The streets were steps leading down. Across the sinister Oxmarket they ran, into Tso-fu Street. They felt their way from house to house. The lanterns hovered over every doorway. Finally the soldiers banged on doorposts with their halberds, woke the startled, shouting inhabitants, who came rushing out. Rapid words were being exchanged when from the last house but one before the market a long whistle came. Then several piercing whistles. Against the half open doors of an empty, tumbledown house two bloody sacks were leaning, from which shoeless human feet projected. When a soldier and Tai-tsung pulled up the coarse matting two men were sitting there motionless on the threshold, breathing shallowly, queueless heads sunk on their chests. The sign of the five evil demons on their foreheads. On the crossed arms of one—neck and half the face thick-crusted with blood—a superb sleeve dagger.

They thronged into the stinking house. Rats scuttled big as cats over the front yard, over the steps, through the empty rooms with

their collapsed roof beams. On the strawstrewn k'ang, lying on its side, a dead dog mouldered.

Tai-tsung, knees trembling with cold, stood in the doorway. He let the lantern drop, howled as he knelt and rubbed Lao-hsü's hands.

The whole street gathered round. As knowledge spread of who it was that lay here the men lifted their hands, the women cried out in fear. They brought water and powdered whitecake, washed the wounds, dusted them.

The soldiers had quickly got hold of two public sedan chairs.

The bearers jostled each other in their haste. On the way Lao-hsü awoke, asked Tai-tsung where he was. The old man comforted him. In front of the palace he whimpered for his knife. Louder than the alarm gong the clear boyish voice resounded through the sleeping house: "Who's got my knife? Yung-kuang! Yung-kuang! Give me the dagger. Your dagger!"

Upstairs Chao Hui's gong squalled.

Tai-Tsung was astonished next morning at his master's calm. Chao asked, as the slave soaped and shaved his head, where they had found Lao-hsü. He had asked five times already. At great length and with many fanciful details the man crouching behind him told the tale. He skipped over the deplorable situation in which they had found the wounded boys. He patted the gleaming skull with tissue paper. Chao tossed about on his couch, raised himself with cracking joints onto his elbows, looked the old man, who shrank respectfully back, in the face. Who did he suspect, then? He grunted in his deep bass voice. Was Lao-hsü's breast badge intact, with its Banner device? And when Tai-tsung coloured Chao roared, "Did they leave him his pigtail?" A friendly, hefty slap on the old man's hunched shoulders, then Chao Hui stretched.

His little eyes again wandered restlessly about the room. They bored, excavated.

A little servant girl slipped through the door. The grieving Hai-t'ang would be glad to speak with Old Master. He followed the girl

at once, through the hall of twelve green pillars that served as a reception room, into the women's quarters that lay towards the woods. Hai-t'ang was not in her room, nor on the balcony with her daughter. But a cheerful lively girl gave the hastening man a deep ch'ing-an on the gong and chanted: The grieving Mistress was grinding medicines by the young illuminary's brick bed.

Wordlessly they retraced their steps across the Turfan carpets. Hai-t'ang was crouching on a yellow rush mat beside the k'ang on which Lao-hsü lay delirious. Two Chinese servants, old fat women, sat beside her holding umbrella, fan. A full face: the straight cut fringe of the Cantonese women on her yellowish-white powdered forehead. Red beauty spots over thickly drawn eyebrows. Her eyes were large and almond shaped, almost round. Only when she smiled did they narrow to slits, lines. Irises a satiny brown-black, swimming in little bluetinged whites. The eyes dwelt naked, lidless, in their roomy sockets; the short stiff lashes stood out like thorns above them. The nose was set flat on its broad low bridge, though it ended in a fine surprising upturn. The nostrils as they breathed were incomparably tender and soulful. Brownish-yellow skin of a wilful dullness lay smooth on the soft, well proportioned body, over the roundness of her expressive face, about the very small, broad hands whose well-turned fingers wore silver sheaths over the long nails. When the blood flowed into Hai-t'ang's face the skin took on a tender olive green hue.

She bowed to Chao Hui, put down the wooden red lacquered bowl in which she had been working with a thinstemmed pestle, took the paper fan from the servant. With his principal wife Chao Hui, unlike other husbands, did not speak of children, the household, relatives. From the first years of their marriage young Hai-t'ang had won a place beside him. He had in those days been fortunate to use her influence with her father, Huang Tzu-tung, governor of Anhui; his promotion was rapid. In the Lower Reaches, south of the little town of Hsinghua, they acquired large fertile estates on the Chulou canal. Even now the literati there on Mussel Canal under the warm southern sky sang of Hai-t'ang's intelligence and sweetness, of her

refined learning, also of her untamability.

He sat down on a stool by the brick bed. They spoke long and earnestly, conversing in pure kuan-hua, which the servants did not understand. Anger coloured Hai-t'ang's cheeks; the large fan whisked in her left hand. "For as long as the Great Dyke has stood along the Yangtze the villainous rabble has not dared such a deed. And shall not again treat our precious child so. We helped restrain the Huang-ho, Chao, China's Sorrow. The wild swans shall not fly again across this land before the hooves of our swiftest horses have overtaken the murderers, trampled them."

Such was the import of their long, fierce discussion. While Hai-t'ang, beside herself with grief, rocked back and forth and clapped her little soft hands. While she grasped the dangling sleeves of the Tartar, in whose eyes the pupils grew wide with a thrilling, hungry passion.

The male residents of Tso-fu Street were punished with twenty blows of the long rod, the neighbourhood night watchman was thrown into gaol, the district intendant of police dismissed.

Chao Hui summoned the town's Prefect. For two days he pleaded sickness. When the general's courier came on the evening of the second day with orders either to appear or to appoint a personal representative and then in view of the continuing grave situation in the province to resign his office, the Taot'ai acceded. Obedience was bitter to him. As Prefect of the town he was subordinate to the Viceroy of Chihli; only in the previous month had an Imperial decree been issued, empowering the specially appointed general Chao Hui to require in quite exceptional cases that civil officials of the rank of Fut'ai and above should report directly to him.

In the temple of the town god, behind the altar, was the god's bedchamber, his bed and clothes. A second bed stood in the sparsely furnished room opposite the adytum. This was provided for senior officials of the town and district, when before deciding on important matters they wished to obtain advice from the Lord of the Walls and

Moats, the great wise god. Before journeying to Chao's camp Tang Shao-yi undertook his temple sleep.

Riders pranced in the van, runners cried their piercing "Make way for the Taot'ai!", oncoming sedan chairs were forced to the side, carts overturned. The bearers had steady shoulders: a rhythmic, sure pace carried the mandarin's green palanquin in the fresh morning out from the city wall. Outside the city yellow dust blew from the plain, and not far away the strong square ramparts of the camp rose, barely distinguishable from the earth. The yokeshaped gate. Fearsome little soldiers in blue jackets shot arrows at hanging mice, strolled in the rectilinear streets of the camp, juggled on staves held steady by others. In the centre of the camp on a high building a red pennant with white characters fluttered: Yamen of the General Officer Commanding. A runner carried the Prefect's long red visiting card into the building; the bearers half set their load down in the courtyard. Then the runner beckoned. The palanquin stood in deep sand before the door. The large, corpulent mandarin in his official robes, at his belt a fan and embroidered tobacco pouch with flint and steel, slowly climbed out and slowly mounted the two steps to Chao Hui's yamen. Chao came to meet him. They exchanged greetings with endless flourishings of the fists, up and down. The door of the yamen remained open.

In the open room Chao Hui sat opposite his guest. The teacups in front of them remained covered. Coolly the Taot'ai regarded the slender Tartar, whose cheekbones stood out a burning red, whose little moustaches hung over thin lips, whose catblack eyes glittered; who took a couple of pulls on the silvermounted mouthpiece of the waterpipe. Water gurgled.

Each spoke with intense interest of the other's family. It was perhaps coincidence that the general's silver hand tapped ceaselessly on the table: the Imperial hand, three fingers extended, the sign of judicial authority. Very soon the general alluded to his guest's indisposition, which he much regretted. When the Taot'ai, leaning on the table, asked after Lao-hsü's condition Chao, grasping the silver mouthpiece, asked louder what intelligence the town

authorities had obtained relating to the rebels; whether the sects had been uncovered, and the emissaries who agitated in the town; what gatherings within the town boundaries had been raided during the past few weeks.

Tang Shao-yi smiled complaisantly. Several had been apprehended at sutra-reading, but as a rule insurrectionaries went about their business in secret and weren't as easy to catch as rampaging cattle, barbarian hordes, perambulating youths. If it were all so easy, the Governor General and the Fut'ai would not have needed to request help from the Son of Heaven, from the most successful general in many a year. They exchanged bows.

The recent occurrences, Chao continued, his expression hard, demonstrated the impudence and audacity of the insurgents. He intended to report to Ch'ien-lung and propose that in any troubled district the streets where political crimes were committed or insurgents arrested should be burned. He would further recommend that for some months the old system of mutual clan supervision should be reintroduced throughout the province, and the ten mutually responsible households punished together. The attentive Tang could not find words to express his amazement. "Your Excellency observed during your felicitous time in Anhui how difficult it is to contain the raging waters of the Great River. The conspirators and sectarians are seeping through the foundations of our defenceless houses."

"A man is not water. A man can die."

"The power of the glorious Emperor K'ang-hsi has acquired Tibet for the blackhaired sons of Han. The land of Tibet is far away. Its abundant passes are beyond the horizon. No army is plundering its stolid populace, as Your Excellency intends to I plunder here. Go with your horde to Tibet. I know Chihli. It is peaceful—without soldiers."

"Tang Shao-yi has never been in Tibet. He does not know the pestilence of that land. In Lhasa, in Tashilunpo the pestilence walks in yellow robes and red priest-girdle through the streets and wears precious jade rings on its fingers. They take the copper cash from a

man's pockets and the brain from his skull. They walk through the streets. Here they seep under our houses."

"Our land is peaceful, Excellency. It can accommodate many priests. Not fifty years have passed since Chihli and Shansi suffered a drought of many months, the wells dried up, the cattle died in droves. The father of Ch'ien-lung, sublime Yung-cheng, now throned in Heaven, found only steppe in the rich provinces. No army stood then outside Yingp'ing, outside Shanhaikwan. No peasants fled their villages for fear of soldiers. In Peking the Emperor went to the Altar of Heaven and addressed a petition to Shangti; processions chanted in every province. And it rained! People thought the age of Yao and Shun had returned. But that sort of wisdom, perhaps, seems ridiculous to more elevated minds."

Since Chao said nothing, just stared at him unblinking, he continued coolly to give rein to his education. He spoke of the mythical ancient, Shen Nung, born in an age of fishermen and hunters; he taught agriculture, sampled the taste of herbs, mixed medicines, so that even now he was held in great esteem among doctors, greater perhaps even than Ts'ang Chieh.

Wordlessly the general clapped his hands. The waterpipe that a servant brought he thrust behind him with a brusque movement of the arm, pointed to a large scroll on a small corner table. Controlling his voice he read out the latest Imperial edict:

> When in any district unruly persons declare themselves to be divine or Buddhas and purport to found a heretical religion or sprinkle themselves with water imbued with virtuous or magical powers, or when they seduce the populace with clandestine religious practices and collect money among themselves, then, even if no danger of a breach of the peace is occasioned, the sub-prefect of the district who neglects to proceed to that place and arrest the criminals shall be demoted by two ranks in the Civil List. And the Prefect shall be demoted by one rank.

He did not continue. Tang Shao-yi had thrust out his broad chin and assumed a challenging smile. Chao laid down the scroll.

"The Imperial edict that Your Excellency has done me the honour to read out does not apply to me. For me, miserable lizard, another

decree applies. The law against heresy. Your Excellency will understand."

But he seemed not to understand.

"The old law that hangs on every wall. I mean that law. Your insignificant servant, Excellency, will speak slowly and dearly. Your insignificant servant stands in the place of those insurgents who are to be cut into pieces, whose wives and daughters are to be sent to Ili whose graves are to be filled with rubble. Your insignificant servant grants his protection to all who fall foul of this law. It is the particular pleasure and the unbounded delight of the most obedient slave who cowers before you to succour and shelter those who come athwart Your Excellency's measures. And happily athwart."

The table with the covered teacups between Chao Hui and Tang Shao-yi rattled. Both had stood up.

The general, whose eyes were starting from their sockets, growled, "I'll have you bound and laid in the dust."

"At Your Excellency's command. We are at war. This poor northern province has no greater wish than to live in a state of war with the murderers of Ili. Those who dwell meekly within the four seas pray and obey the laws. Let only the Imperial hand not be raised. What Your Excellency and this clod of yellow have to discuss has nothing to do with the glorious Son of Heaven."

"Are you, T'ang Shao-yi, Taot'ai of Shanhaikwan, in league or in collusion with the insurgents? Perhaps the words of my renowned senior lack clarity."

The Taot'ai was a head taller than the military mandarin opposite him. Sunlight fell sharply through the open door into the room, over the Taot'ai's back into the elaborately bony face of Chao Hui, this face gnawed by blizzards, whose small ears with their shallow folds had admitted more death screams than those of any other man of his time. The one-eyed peacock feather on his round cap shimmered greenly in the light.

T'ang Shao-yi, instead of answering the question, asked if in his mulish ignorance he might make a proposal.

"The honorable general was sent here by the Emperor with special

authority. In a few weeks the Emperor will possibly travel to his summer palace in Jehol, or to the tombs at Mukden. Before the Emperor passes through the province it must be at peace."

"Continue!"

"The dwarf before you would not dare to make a proposition. There is only one solution known to this dwarf." T'ang, uninvited, sat down again. Slowly the general too bent his knees.

"And that is—for Your Excellency to come over to us."

The two men looked blindly into each other's little eyes, searched out facial lines. Through Chao's brain there swept suddenly a bleak, helpless feeling; his brain swam in it, slithered as in a tub of greasy, filthy washing water.

"If Your Excellency does not pacify the province in the next few months, at least provisionally, you will lose what remains of your estates in the Lower Reaches, will yourself be dismissed, your glorious ancestors demoted. If you think of saving yourself, all will fall out as you wish. The insurrectionaries have infiltrated almost every family and many of the guilds. It is impossible to search them out, since there are as many havens for them as roofs in the town. The train of events is easy to predict. The hatred of the peaceable masses for the murderous horde that has been set here under your command is growing constantly. The insurrectionaries are gaining adherents. The war-likin contributions are becoming insupportable, the tax revenues of the civil power are diminishing. Let your troops commit just a few more atrocities against citizens, and this province and Shantung and Shansi as well will erupt in rebellion. They will be beaten down five times. Other armies will come, other generals. But the war will—drag on for months."

Now the Tartar understood the wily mandarin. His thoughts cohered again. Carefully he probed the size of the losses in tax revenue suffered by the civil power, last month, the month before that. Now, as he approached the core of the matter, he marvelled at the sureness with which the Taot'ai had kept a grip on his thoughts, like a lathe its iron bar. And how the artful man had deceived and nearly, nearly seduced him.

Chao Hui suggested, tentatively, turning over half the likin proceeds to the town. But T'ang declined in tones of delight, suggested that the tax might be increased a trifle for certain guilds and a third of the resulting revenue be allowed to flow to the civil power, in furtherance of Imperial commands for the suppression of rebellion. Civil and military could then at last work hand in hand. Also, in view of the considerable deficit in the town treasury, it was desirable to levy on the rich merchants a special, not too heavy, tax, proportionate to their means, in the name of the General Plenipotentiary, for three or perhaps four months. Some arbitrary portion of this tax could usefully be put to increasing the strength of the town police.

Chao Hui agreed, with a few minor diminutions, to the Taot'ai's proposals.

T'ang grinned ceaselessly. He asked time and again: However could they have misunderstood each other? It was certain the town would now be at peace, with new resources flowing to the authorities. This intolerable discord between magistrate and military had (so he was reliably informed) already driven several town officials into the arms of the rebels.

They smiled at each other, bowed countless times towards each other, showed their yellow teeth.

Chao Hui felt a little dizzy. Red and green spots danced before his eyes.

They lifted the covers of their teacups, drank tea from the plantations near Swatow. Chao accompanied his expansive guest quickly down the two steps to his palanquin.

Inside he let his head fall, heavy and reeling, onto the table. With his hot forehead he kneaded the red scroll, the Imperial edict of the previous week.

That evening the Taot'ai sent to his house two valuable sceptres, two ju-yis in white jade with finely carved birds and flowers, on the endplates verses by Ch'ien-lung.

Chao Hui's emissaries next morning carried into the town magistracy a screen consisting of twelve porcelain leaves; the leaves

were wonderfully painted with cherry blossom and longnecked birds; finest underglazing in cobalt blue.

Hai-t'ang asked whether T'ang Shao-yi had been sent packing, and these were presents for the new Taot'ai. Chao Hui turned his head away.

Book One

Wang Lun

On the mountains of Chihli, in the plains, under the all-suffering sky they sat, against whom the armour and arrows of Emperor Ch'ien-lung were mobilized. Who passed through the walled towns, spread out through market towns and villages.

A gentle shudder went through the land where the "Truly Powerless" appeared. For months their name—Wu-wei—had been once again on all lips. They had no abode, begged the rice, the bean broth they needed, helped the peasants, artisans at their work. They did not preach, sought no converts. The literati who mingled with them strove in vain to hear from them a religious dogma. They had no icons, did not speak of the Wheel of Existence. At night many made their camp under rocks, in the vast forests, mountain caves. Often a loud moaning and wailing rose from their resting places. That was the young brothers and sisters. Many ate no meat, trampled no flowers, seemed in friendship with plants, animals and rocks.

There was a vigorous young man from Shantung who had passed the first examination with distinction. He rescued his father, who had gone out alone in a fishing boat, from the gravest danger; before setting out after his father, he vowed to follow the adherents of Wu-wei. And so he went, the joyful examination celebrations hardly over, quietly from the house. He was a respectful, rather shy youth with deepest eyes, who suffered visibly under his spiritual struggle.

A bean merchant, a gaunt bony man, lived through fifteen years

of childless marriage. He grieved deeply that after he was dead there would be no one to pray for him, to feed and care for his spirit. At the age of forty-five he left his home.

Chin was a rich man from the foot of the Ch'an. He lived in a constant rage because, however carefully he guarded his wealth, month after month he was the victim of thefts, though only of trifles. On top of this came the extortions of policemen, tax gatherers; several times he lost houses, burned down by illwishers. He feared that one day he would stand bereft of goods and chattels. He felt impotent, without rights. So he gave away all his money to blind musicians, old bawds, actors, set fire to his own house and took to the woods.

Young rakes with girls they had rescued from the painted houses drifted in. Often the girls, who were among the most revered of the sisters, could be seen in strange ecstasies under the purple callicarps, in the fields of millet, and heard to babble incomprehensibly.

Six girl friends from the northern Imperial Canal who had been married as children jumped, in the month when they were to be taken to the houses of their bridegrooms, tied together with a halter into the canal below the town. Since they injured themselves against the canal wall as they jumped and hung there wailing loudly, they were rescued by some passing barrow haulers who conveyed them to the nearest police post after making shift to bandage the quite unresisting girls with scraps of clothing. As they were recovering under the friendly care of the officials and putting themselves to rights, their fathers came storming up outside. The girls heard the noisy altercation with the constables, climbed out through a rear window and made off. They tramped from village to village, hid themselves in a secluded cave in the mountains, obtained food by helping on the farms, in the mills round about. The youngest of them, a blooming fifteen year old, daughter of an old schoolmaster's concubine, died there when a robber violated and then strangled her. Not long afterwards the robber together with the girls fell in with a group of sectarians.

In northeastern China, in the provinces of Chihli, Shantung,

Shansi, even in Kiangsu and Honan, in great cities with several hundred thousand inhabitants, in hardworking villages and idle hamlets, it came to pass every day or two that someone went into the market and in front of a fraud or beggar priest or crippled child tipped all his money and valuables into a mule trough. That husbands disappeared from families much blessed with children; they would be seen, months later, in distant regions begging with the vagabonds.

Here and there a minor official went about listlessly and in a daze for weeks on end, answered every question snappishly, shrugged his shoulders insolently when rebuked, then suddenly committed some astonishing crime: embezzling public funds, tearing up important documents, attacking some harmless fellow and breaking ribs. Once sentenced he would bear his punishment and his shame with equanimity, or slip out of prison and into the woods. These were people to whom separation from family and possessions came hardest, who could break free of them only by a crime.

They taught nothing that was not already known. An old parable they told passed from mouth to mouth:

> There was once a man who was frightened of his shadow and loathed his footprints. T'o escape both he decided to run away. But the more he moved his legs the more footprints he left behind. And however fast he ran the shadow never left his body. So he fancied he was going too slow, began to run faster, not stopping until his strength was exhausted and he died. He didn't know that all he had to do to lose his shadow was linger in some shady spot; that in order not to leave footprints he needed only to keep still.…

The land exhaled a sigh. Such joyglazed eyes had never been seen. A tremor passed through families. And when at evening there was once again talk of the "Truly Powerless" and the old parable was told, each looked at the others and in the morning took note of who was missing.

A sweet secret suffering appeared to afflict healthy young men and women in particular. It seemed they were being drawn away by bridal pangs of some kind.

Wang Lun was the head of the movement.

He came from Shantung, from a village on the coast called Hunkang-ts'un in the district of Hailing, the son of a simple fisherman. Later he would mention casually that his father was the first among the local fisherfolk: on the wall of the fisherman's guildhouse you could still see his father's name, the founder of the house. But in the whole of Hailing there was no guildhouse. The two hundred families of the hamlet scraped a hard living. The men sailed after the catch, the women tended the sparse fields. Soil was so scarce that they built artificial fields on the broad terraces of chalk cliff that descended close to the beach. Laboriously men and women hauled loose earth in wooden trugs up over the narrow ridges, trug after trug, then strewed meagre fertilizer of dried crab shells and human ordure.

There above the sea women, children and old men toiled all through the day. Shouts and dull noises wafted down into the empty village. More families had lived here once. But over fifty houses had been burned one day by a passing plundering band from Chefoo. They crushed the old headman's feet between two blocks of granite when he wouldn't give them the two hundred taels they demanded, then broke his left arm with a blow from a plank, and after they had smashed a large hole in the ice—it was winter—threw him into a pond. The rhythmic yells of the six men as they pushed the frantic headman back again and again with boards, the clanging of planks on the ice, the noisy choking and blowing of the drowning man and the impatient whinnying of the stolen horses was one of Wang Lun's few childhood memories.

During the two hot months Wang the elder went out at sunrise in his boat, a two-masted junk that gazed from two green goggle eyes painted on the bows. Five fishermen boarded it. The sails filled; they shipped oars; glided smoothly over the Po-hai with the neighbouring junks. They cast the serpentine, putrid-smelling net overboard, attached it to another junk. The capstans that lowered and raised the net snarled, screeched, held fast.

The men stayed out until late afternoon. The sun's heat fell like

dry, scorching rain over man and beast. Old Wang sat fatbellied on the rowing bench under a great straw hat like a plate and threw sharp stones at seagulls that dived out of the shimmering air behind the junks. While the other sailors in the boat smoked pipes or chewed tobacco. As soon as Wang prepared his sling a little sailor sat in front of him against the stem mast, smoked nonchalantly, carefully drew a springy willow switch from under the ropes. The sling whirred, the little man yawned noisily and stretched, the sling wound itself around his stick and outstretched arm, cracked the tensely waiting Wang unfailingly on the chest or legs with the stone. Glumly he looked after his flapping seagull. The boat rolled with the laughter of the four men sprawling on the wet planks.

Wang swaggered pompously through the teahouses; once, leaving his bean patch one idle morning, applied at the courthouse for the position of Chief Magistrate, to the wailing fury of his toil-jaded wife who could already hear the mockery he would bring on himself. He liked lying on the sand next to the bucket that his two sons filled with charcoal to dry squid in. If around the time of the ebb tide they lit the bucket on the junk itself he would amble down to the beach and squat on his heels. Empty fish baskets lay there half overturned, the dried creatures spread on the sand colouring nicely in the sun. They felt hot to the touch.

The bigbellied man poked around in mudholes, pulled long sandworms out, gave half of them to his wife to dry and sell. He kept a great pile for himself, dried them furtively and slurped his delicious hearty soup behind the baskets.

Then after a while the two boys used to come over from the junk and, as he was sweating, unwind his footcloths. They crouched gravely in front of him with their little rattails of queues, and waited. In a proud, nasal tone loud enough for the neighbours to hear Wang spoke over their heads, flaunting his fat torso, leaning back on his elbows: he called this his lesson time. In fact he knew his primer, the *Book of One Thousand Characters* of Chou Hsingszu; a few mistakes aside he knew it by heart; he seemed to have learnt a few phrases as well from the *Book of Women*. Many times he explained

to the children his regret that he was not stricter with them. To be strict with them was his sacred duty, for—and here the boys joined in chanting: “Upbringing without strictness is a father’s laziness.”

And every few days the future teacher of three provinces heard that joy, anger, grief, fear, love, hate and desire were the seven passions. It was not often the boys could attend to him at leisure. Wang Lun’s face was black-brown and square, broad; strong lines moulded a lively, cunning face. No amount of sea glare darkened the softer, sallower complexion of his brother of the same age: the boy remained suppler, paler and more serious than Wang Lun, whose spiteful tricks earned him little love from his playmates and who showed little understanding of one of his father’s maxims: that among the five supreme moral relationships was brotherly love.

Lively, inclined more to play than work, they sat redcapped on the sharp stones of the beach by the great fishing net. On a grassy dune behind them ten paces off the shapeless bulk of their father lay, his bare legs, covered in black hairs, arranged one over the other as he picked small embedded mussel shells from horny soles. In his right hand resting on the ground he held one end of the net that the boys were staining with the thick sappy juice of mandarin peel. He hauled himself upright, the children clicked musically, he spat and grunted. Occasionally a teaching droned from his lips; for example: “Since time immemorial the gourd has been a symbol of fecundity.” Until a gust of wind blew gritty sand into his face, he rolled coughing out of his furrow and knocked over their pot of stain. With a doleful, beggarly look he told them they should have found a better place for the staining. And they wound the cloths again about his legs and moved a few paces farther off.

The greatest event in the life of Wang Lun’s father was the journey he made to his brother’s house for the wedding of his nephew, three hundred li from Hunkang-ts’un. For three weeks he didn’t see the beach or the scrubby bean fields. A barber, who was also a sorcerer on the side, lived in his brother’s house; Wang Shen sat with him a lot in the evenings.

And the morning after his return he walked with slow steps to a

man who knew something of woodworking and promised him a quantity of dried sandworms worth four hundred and fifty cash if he would carve a tall red plaque for him with the inscription: *WANG SHEN, PUPIL OF THE RENOWNED SORCERER KWAI-TAI OF LIU-CHIA-TS'UN, MASTER OF THE WIND AND WATER*. After night fell, six days later, he fetched the gleaming plaque—black characters on a raspberry-red ground, blue-edged—with his eldest son, climbed onto the roof of the house, with two ropes taken from his boat attached it to the projecting ridge beam while his wife slept, so that there over the doorway a plaque hung down: *WANG SHEN, PUPIL OF THE RENOWNED SORCERER KWAI-TAI OF LIU-CHIA-TS'UN, MASTER OF THE WIND AND WATER*.

Next morning his wife, when she saw the splendid plaque and had woken up her still sleeping husband, suffered the first recurrence for years of her nervous attack. Back then, when one of the arsonists had demanded through the window whether there was anyone apart from her in the house, in her terror she had concealed both one year old boys by gripping them in the folds of her wide trousers, and as she replied "No" had jerked her head sharply to the right. Now something green surged through her head, the two ropes holding the plaque grew as broad as leaves, sawed between her eyes; a blue unjointed arm reached out intermittently, a hand sent fingers streaming towards her. Rhythmically the woman threw her head from left to right, from right to left, her legs knocked together, she danced like a figure in a puppet show; the children hid from her on the brickbed.

And they screamed out loud and ran into the village street among yapping little dogs when Wang, the great elephant-legged clod, burst into the smoky room from the yard, stumped up and down with a tiger mask on, sang wheezily over his wife who was now prostrate, stroked, whispered. Half an hour later the woman was asleep. A crowd of children and women stood at the door, stood silently in the yard, scattered gabbling when the tiger mask came near.

That day was a turning point in Wang Shen's life. His wife said

not a word about the red plaque, indeed became sparing of words in dealings with her husband, kept out of his way.

Now he no longer passed himself off as a mere casual teacher. In the yard under an alder he set to studying peculiar signs on a bamboo tablet he had brought back from the sorcerer, walked back and forth between midden and tackle shed with his head in the air, recited out loud: “Eight times nine is seventy-two. Two rules the Pair. In the Pair is united the Unpair. The Unpair rules the Zodiac. The Zodiac holds sway over the Moon. The Moon holds sway over hair. Therefore hair grows in twelve months.” He referred from time to time perplexed to the bamboo tablet; pondered, ashamed of himself, freed himself with a quick rejecting gesture. He walked, brow wrinkled, among the busy fishermen on the beach of an evening, gazed raptly at the purple cloud masses, stopped for a long time lost in thought in front of a basket maker’s little poodle, said dreamily, as if talking to himself, “Seven times nine is sixty-three. Three rules the Pole Star. The star of dogs. Therefore dogs are born after three months.”

They laughed behind his back only at first; then the view took hold that he truly did have the makings of a Taoist savant, this former village clown. He knew so much: that swallows and sparrows dive into the sea and become lizards; he could name the thousand year old fox demon, the nine-headed pheasant demon and the scorpion demon; and no one could understand what he said about Yin and Yang, the bright Masculine and the dark brooding Feminine.

He went out to sea. When he made the experiment one morning of not going down to the junk, his wife stood silently beside the brickbed. He could see through flickering eyelids that she was going to wake him as usual with a punch in the ribs, but then she turned and went to wake fifteen year old Lun and his brother. And every morning before sunrise she woke the two lads; he snored snugly on in a half sleep.

Wang Shen went in the mornings to meditate in the little temple of the God of Medicine, the last building but one in the village. Since

everyone in and around the village knew him his singular offices were much in demand, his technique of the “Devil’s Leap”, and in particular the “Breaking of Pregnancy”. This term was used by the inhabitants of this part of Shantung for a strange custom. When old men or sickly children were seen in the vicinity of a pregnant woman it was feared they would enter the woman’s body, perhaps to make themselves well and young again. In such emergencies Wang Shen in his tiger mask stamped about the room while the woman squatted, charmed her body while flagellating it with rushes, and sweating uttered unrecognisable syllables. Sometimes he brought home a thousand cash from these operations.

But once he came back from an exorcism walking gingerly with the mask pulled crooked over his face, down the street, into his yard, up to the door, where he collapsed. His wife tore the wooden mask from his leaden face. He wheezed. A whistle came from his chest; he twisted his body and his hands grabbed about him. His wife ran for herbs, heated up two tiles for his feet. She despatched a small child. Since it had no cash it had to beg the money to buy a bamboo fortune slip in the Medicine Temple. The village shopkeeper and apothecary administered the decoction indicated on the slip. Wang spat it out.

Then in the afternoon a babble of many voices grew outside the house. Gongbeat after gongbeat, ceaselessly; bells, shouts from afar. Heavy steps stumbled from the yard into the stuffy sickroom. The God of Medicine, a redpainted pillar of wood, had come himself to his pupil to make the diagnosis, bring healing. The woman shouted into her sleeping husband’s ear, “Show yourself, come, show yourself!” She supported the half blind man, who mumbled and gaped. It was quiet in the room.

Out the god stepped to the apothecary’s. The bearers swayed into the shop with their poles, the god’s staff pointed to the lowest corner of the shelves. Secretly and in horror the young apothecary’s assistant with his back turned made the protective sign of the tiger: the staff had pointed to the Draught of Black Water.

And nothing more could be done.

The god was back alone in his mean, dilapidated dwelling at the end of the village. Darkness had fallen. His fat pupil, the bold coercer of demons, turned quickly onto his back during the third night watch. His wife asked what he wanted. She could only pull on the shoes that would carry him over the River of Death, the shoes embroidered with plum blossom, toad and goose, and with a white unfurled waterlily.

Old Wang had wanted Lun to prepare for the first examination. But his talents lay elsewhere and were quite special. Already when his head was first sheared and shaved a long black-brown mark had been noticed on his right temple, and identified by his father as the Pearl of Perfection.

Wang Lun grew apace, clever and with a giant's strength.

Mules, dogs, fish and people all suffered under his roughness and his practical jokes. As a six year old he had been introduced to thieving by his own father, in a remarkable manner. It was the villagers' custom, at the time of the Spring Festival, and in particular on the fifth day of the first month, to steal vegetables from each other's gardens and fields, because such vegetables bring luck. No trespasser, as long as he belonged to the locality, was allowed to be driven off that day; the owners themselves made sure to put aside and conceal all produce of any value.

When Wang Lun accompanied his father and brother to try his luck on one such sanctioned thieving expedition, he fared badly: a couple of dried-up peanuts was all he scraped from the mud. He trotted away from the others in a rage, ran home, sat quietly sucking on a salt crab in the low parlour beside his mother, who praised him for not joining in such foolishness.

But it was for another reason that he sat quietly there. He had reached a very simple and brief conclusion: if you want to steal something nice, the fifth day of the first month is the worst possible day for it. It's ridiculous and absurd to go stealing on the very day when everyone steals and hides their things.

He promised himself another way of celebrating the filth day of the first month: divide the day into several portions throughout the year, for there were twenty-four hours in the day that had to be used up; he would use the permitted twenty-four hours to steal the whole year through.

And so the clever, cunning boy stole by skips and jumps for twenty-four hours in the year and every theft had the appearance of legitimacy, and was accompanied by the pleasant feeling that he had pulled a fast one on the village; stealing was a delight.

Once, even, during the old man's last year, Wang Lun directed his thievish logic against his father: he took from him the thin bamboo tablet, now grown dark brown and unreadable. The white-bearded Wang Shen was overcome with deep sadness when he saw Lun sitting in the yard with the long lost tablet on his knees, turning it this way and that, sniffing at it suspiciously. Lun bounded away with the tablet; the old man wept, for the tablet and for his son.

There were few in the village willing to pick a fight with the rough fellow; his brother was completely under his thumb.

Everyone was very happy when, bored with fishing, drying, netmending, discontented with the poverty of his native place where even the best contrived scheme yielded no more than thirty or forty tiao, he marched aimlessly one day with a few copper cash on a string out of Hunkang-ts'un along the high road to Chinan-fu.

It was springtime. At first he walked alone. Then when the bile rose into his mouth he tagged on to trains of barrows carrying pottery from the kilns out to the villages, and earned a few cents. He climbed, seething at the niggardly wage, out of the green valley of the Wei-ho up into wild hills; behind lonely houses, grasping an axe of green sandstone in a shaft of sandalwood, he waylaid the occupants, grabbed whatever they had about them and fled. On the dreadful craggy paths he clambered along there was no sign of spring. Becks rushed in deep carved gullies, in spate with the melting snow; the tattered vagrant never went down to them to wash; he was scared. For days he carried in his jerkin twenty valuable snuff bottles of finest glass; ate yellow-red kakis, sweet

dried apples, didn't shave, didn't tie up his matted hair: he had knocked into a little girl as he fled from the caravanserai; when she fell she rolled over a cliff, smashed onto a sharp rock. Wang dared not go into the gully for fear of the child's ghost.

On the last western outrunners of T'ai-shan, overlooking the flowerdrenched plain of the Tach'ing-ho, he laid up for almost a month among the beggars and vagabonds of the area, who squatted together in miserable hovels. Grew thin; felt wretched; he kept quiet about his means of subsistence in front of the idle creatures that he set up puzzles with in the evenings using pieces of quartz. Around midday he took a rocky path upwards, clambered through a bare gorge, then arrived at the back wall of a vile inn that owned three Mongolian cattle. The first time he rabbitpunched the boy who looked after them and threatened him with the axe as he helped himself to half a pail of milk. Now the boy expected him every third day, hid old rice cakes for him, raw eggs, let him take as much milk as he wanted.

When the boy was not there one day and two snapping dogs were running around the cowshed, Wang slowly and hungrily retraced his weary steps, through the gorge, down the rocky path. At first he wanted to get back to the beggars and give one of them a thrashing; then he sunned himself for the last few hours of daylight, stayed sleeping on the loose gneiss and at the first glimmer of dawn climbed down from the mountains over the gentle hills, the smooth elevations of chalk. The well watered plain stretched out beyond the horizon. In the dazzling light of evening he saw in front of him the strong walls and the great city of Chinan-fu.

It was immensely lush, the country around Chinan-fu.

On this side of the broad, clay-coloured river and across it the millet fields stood higher than a man already, erect stems with green sharp leaf blades and brown heads that bent heavily and hung like warhorse manes or helmet plumes, fuzzy with fine hairs. When the warm breeze from the mountains passed over them the fields shook

themselves as if the stalks were fleeing, all crouched in the starting position. Young fresh plants grew in the narrow footpaths that Wang Lun ambled along next morning; he pulled a few up, stuck the thin tender silky fronds in his mouth and sucked on them. Thrushes and great ravens chased each other noisily over the damp earth, perched on slender locust trees in whose broad crowns the gynandrous leaves set up a swaying and rustling, as if the trees were suppressing frantic laughter.

In a roadside barber stall outside the gate the unkempt man had himself washed, shaved and cheaply outfitted for one of his glass bottles. Then, smiling, he strolled with a familiar greeting to the fat gate guard into the town, in a blue-black overgown, on new felt soles, an empty snuff bottle at his green, rather frayed belt, as if he were just back from one of the many small tea pavilions outside the walls frequented by poets and young gallants.

A great bewildering maze of streets. Shop crammed against shop; food stalls, inns, teahouses, gaudy temples; on the walls bells tinkled in two lovely pagodas to ward off homeless spirits. Wang let himself be carried along in the stream of people, gazed about craftily and with pleasure, in a narrow alley shoved aside a sedan chair and its two bearers.

And after he had laid them both on the ground he found in them his first friends in Chinan-fu, who took him within the hour to their lodging house, an open airy clapboard building doubling as a food stall in Unicorn Street. One wing of the house contained the sordid eating place, from which smoke and smells penetrated the other wings, the open terrace for tea drinkers overlooking the street, and the sleeping quarters. These were cubicles at the back of the tearoom, low, narrow, with a bench to lie on and a stool. Wang only glanced into his room, then went roaming through the nearby streets, spied out opportunities. He had no cash.

He followed two hawker women who were carrying a basket between them into a building, across a wide courtyard and into a half dark room that he recognized only by its thick sweet smell as a temple hall. In the round carved doorway an old, sturdy man sat in

a bright green robe with wide sleeves, queue tied neatly on his crown; he was sitting in front of a little table with incense sticks, paper figures, making an unctious face by pushing his lips down to form a snout, placing his hands before him with the fingers twisted in a peculiar way, and closing his eyes. The women had bought six sticks of incense from him, set them up in front of a brightly coloured wooden statue in the background, a seated god, next to whom drums, mandolins and panpipes hung on the empty wall.

Wang walked past the women's basket that was sitting in the middle of the floor, saw from the corner of his eye as the bonze counted his few cash from one hand to the other and made them vanish without a sound into a box on the wall by the door, again put on his unctious fishface. It was a temple of Han Hsiang-tzu, patron of musicians.

As Wang turned towards the door the bonze stood up, bowed to him, reverenced with folded hands, praised his exalted visitor's piety in a well sifted rhythmical flood of words. Wang too bowed politely. At last the bonze enquired whether the subscription list for a water Mass had yet found favour of admittance at the palace of his patron; five poor blind musicians had drowned in a boat as they were returning from a village on the other side. The Mass for the souls of the drowned would begin in two days. Wang gave a false name and false residence, offered to enter his name there and then on the list of donors affixed to the temple wall.

Then in the dark he broke without difficulty into the temple, got away with over seven hundred cash.

He lived contentedly at the inn for more than a week, then chance brought him in bustling White Tombs Street face to face with the bonze. It was already too late to conceal himself when he saw the light grey priest robes. But to his astonishment the man passed him by grinning with a wave of his hand.

That same night he broke into the bonze's place. The money box was locked but empty. Wang felt his way in the dark to the offering table; under the ashes too there was nothing. Only when he pulled aside the soft cloth on the Eight Immortals table did something clink:

spread out under the cloth were a few handfuls of copper coins.

When the money was spent he worked here and there for some days as a coal hauler, runner in a yamen; but the paltry wages stung him to fury, and also he could get along with nobody. His swaggering nature, his hot temper allied with his giant's strength impelled him everywhere to deeds of violence.

So two weeks later he broke in again at the Music God's temple. He considered first where the bonze might have concealed the day's takings. Not in his bed or sleeping room, that was clear; the bonze knew beyond a doubt that it was Wang who had robbed him, and in his bedroom he would certainly fear for his life. For almost an hour he felt around in the temple, knocked on walls and floor. Finally he placed the bonze's stool on the altar table, felt the statue of silent Han Hsiang-tzu. The god's throat rang hollow: he climbed up, and standing on the wooden thigh easily reached the little money box and opened it. Three handfuls of cash slid into the pouch at his belt.

When he tried to let himself down from his perch he felt something pulling on his queue, no, his neatly tied queue was stuck fast to the ceiling and back wall of the room. With his free hand he fumbled above and behind him. A thick tarry mass was stuck there; he freed his hand with difficulty, fearing that he and the heavy statue would topple down together. Painfully and with the loss of much hair he extricated his queue from the sticky ooze. Growling softly at the bonze he slipped into the street. The stuff stuck resinous on the well shaven skin of his head; his left hand clung to whatever it touched.

His friends in Unicorn Street next morning scraped him clean, painfully, with sharp sticks of wood; his skin bled. No one laughed at him; they feared and loved him, they wondered at his daring. Also he divided the spoils with them.

After that night the flayed thief Wang Lun had only one wish: to avenge himself on the bonze. The man seemed to know where he lived: a few days after this episode he met the grey robe strolling slowly down Unicorn street. The wrinkled face smiled only slightly as Wang bent over the balustrade of the tea terrace; it converted

itself to an expression of pained sympathy for Wang's bandaged skull. The bonze turned many times to look at the poor thief, who made faces behind his back.

Now Wang gave nothing of his last haul to his two friends; he placed almost all of it with his landlord so that he could carry out his plans undisturbed. It had come to a contest between him and the bonze.

Still with his head in bandages he went one afternoon to see the bonze. He was sitting in his place in a solemn attitude; strangers from Wuting-fu were there viewing the temple. When he recognized the casually swaggering Wang, he hurried delightedly across and thanked him for his handsome donation to the recent water Mass, asked how his evidently suffering patron found himself. With furrowed brow he added that his temple was beset with troubles. Some cunning thievish rogue was making himself free in this peaceful quarter of the town and plundering poor Han Hsiang-tzu and his humble servant T'o Chin: that was his name. Wang listened with interest, looking down at him, and asked after a pause for thought what precautions wise T'o Chin had taken against this criminal.

Then T'o, with warm and reiterated thanks for his unbounded benevolence, took this serious man who observed everything with the inquisitive eye of an official on a guided tour. T'o Chin let him see the old empty wall box, showed him the mantraps that he set in the evenings by the doors, pointed out the dried tar on the wall behind the statue. Wang gave advice; would it not be wisest for the bonze to keep the day's takings about his own person? T'o Chin replied by alluding to the dangerousness of the scoundrel, who even … Wang bridled, repudiated the term "scoundrel", explained at the other's smiling glance of enquiry that such strong expressions grated on his ears, that he cultivated such sensitivity of hearing out of deep respect for the patron of music.

They wandered several times, eyeing each other, up and down between the pious strangers from Wuting-fu. Then Wang condescendingly took leave of the priest, who expressed himself

rapturously grateful for the confidence of his illustrious guest.

That night the fisherman's son from Hunkang-ts'un walked distractedly up and down outside the temple. He didn't know how to handle it. He was afraid of exposing himself to the old joker's ridicule. Letting him be was impossible after the wily trickster's latest triumph. For several moments Wang seriously considered waking T'o Chin, thrashing him, and giving himself up to the police.

Then he felt his way across the pitch black yard. In a corner by the outhouse on one side he stopped to let his eyes grow used to the dark. There, dose beside him at an angle to the main door, he saw a long ladder lying on the ground.

He didn't touch it; he pondered. It was one of T'o Chin's little games; the ladder normally stood in a corner of the yard. On the other hand there couldn't be any more hiding places inside the temple where T'o could put his day's takings. Wang carefully stepped around the ladder, tried several times to jump up onto the low roof but couldn't reach and it made too much noise. Then awkwardly, sliding back again and again, he pulled himself up a damp post of the outhouse, swung onto the roof. It took more than an hour before he made it across to the temple roof itself; he was afraid that if he stood upright he would be seen from the street.

And so he crawled bent double and at every doorslam, watchman's drumbeat he fell flat on his stomach, in constant danger of sliding down the steep-angled tiles. He cursed his luck, having to live off the money of such an old villain. Roofrib after roofrib was negotiated; slowly Wang let himself down to the warrior figure on the eaves that held a shiny shield. Behind the shield on the warrior's arm something hung, swung darkly as the eaves bent under Wang's weight. It was the purse. His clammy fingers untied it, a tricky half hour ensued until he stood once more in the street, shivering, his dirty face twisted with anger at the old man's guile.

Around noon, as he stood on the terrace chewing tobacco after lunch, the quick footed landlord came blathering up to hand him a long visiting card. T'o Chin enquired after his benefactor's health, was visibly pleased that his head wounds were healing, observed

Wang's torn hands with distress: earning a living in Chinan-fu was so hard. When they had drunk their tea Wang paid quite openly from his guest's purse, accompanied him to the temple to find out what the business of the ladder was all about. They evinced great sympathy for each other, especially Wang for T'o, since he felt that the advantage was with him and T'o seemed to accept this. At the suggestion of his guest T'o fetched the ladder from its corner, placed it against the roof, climbed up a few rungs. Wang, puzzled, climbed after him up to the roof.

Wang knew it: this game, which he always won and lost at the same time, would be resolved today.

On shaky legs and with a weak back he crept at nightfall hungry and nervous into the yard, got the ladder that was lying again in front of the main door, placed it against the roof and climbed up, his heart pounding. A purse was hanging there again right from the warrior's arm. He lay prone on the roof, uneasy; something seemed to be moving in the yard; once the ladder jogged. He climbed down again quickly, without incident.

He stood rooted there at the foot of the ladder. He couldn't move. His felt shoes were embedded in a thick slime that rose over his ankles. He groaned; worked his way loose by pulling himself up the ladder, leaving his shoes stuck there. His anger gave him grim strength, made him almost senseless. When he stood barefoot and with gummed-up trousers free in the yard, he threw the purse violently at the door of the bonze's room. He yelled through the quiet night to the tinkling of rolling coins:

"There's your filthy money, you son of a turtle." Hammered on the thin wooden wall of the house with his fists, until a soft voice made itself audible from within: "What do you want, my dear? What presents have you brought this son of a turtle in the middle of the night?"

"He'd better come out, that son of a turtle, I want him out here.

"I want to show him what meanness and baseness are. You're going to pay for my shoes and my trousers."

"But the dear, tempestuous man has already received the price of

his shoes and his trousers."

"Come out I say, you prattler, you swindler, you lump of lard, and I'll show you what I mean by pay!"

While Wang Lun raged freezing out in the yard, T'o Chin dressed by the light of an oil lamp in his best robe, put the kettle on to boil, and very calmly opened the door into the yard. Wang wanted to rush at him; because of his gummed-up trousers could only hobble painfully. T'o Chin held the lamp up for him, bowed without ceasing. In the eyes of the strapping young fellow, who felt the ridiculousness of his situation, stood tears of rage and pain. The bonze moved aside for him, indicated the warm brickbed, on which Wang lay down whimpering.

The cup of hot tea that his host proffered with great ceremony he drank in two gulps, while T'o threw open his priest's robe, poured a strong smelling liquid onto a wad of cloth and slowly rubbed the pitch from Wang's legs. Now and then he ran into the yard with his lamp. "A thief might come and steal our money," he explained as he came back in with the purse and shut the door again. He offered Wang a pair of trousers and good felt shoes. The fisherman's son from Hunkang-ts'un sat at the generous man's table, devoured watermelon and gulped down cup after cup. He seemed to be swaying up and down, but the tea was hot and the melon juicy.

In his conversation T'o Chin proved to be as great a reader of men's souls as he was a rogue. His defeated opponent laid his head first on one side, then on the other in wonder at such manifold artfulness. As intended, T'o had caught himself a trusty collaborator.

So the remarkable interaction between the two mutated into friendship.

T'o Chin's occupation was a very simple one. He had under his care the temple of a very poor company—the musicians. They paid him an insignificant sum for his services and placed the room at his disposal; essentially he had to make his own living through the sale of incense and Masses, and everything depended on his own

abilities. In a different quarter of Chinan-fu stood another temple of the Patron of Music, and when T'o's god failed to grant their wishes people would take themselves blaspheming and complaining to the other temple and bring T'o's god into disrepute.

Now Wang Lun and T'o Chin carried on the business jointly. Wang was the bonze's crier and witness. When they made their way of a morning together through the streets and the swarming marketplaces, the giant Wang in a green smock walked ahead of the priest, held the two yard-long horns by their mouths; T'o Chin from time to time blew into the mouthpieces; two deep startling notes bellowed from the horns into the scattering crowd. In front of the silk merchants' booths, the porcelain sellers, they loudly praised the rare, immense efficacy of their god: the lots in his temple gave the surest prescriptions against every illness; a Mass said before him was as effective as it was cheap. It was a good idea to freshen up the divinity now and then, ascribe sensational new abilities to him; so they cried the music god's flair for sniffing out crimes, thefts. If they were then led off somewhere they simply spied out the opportunities as they carried a small statue of Han Hsiang-tzu around, stole something later, and with the help of Han Hsiang-tzu's nose unearthed the greater part of the booty in some distant spot. Naturally, when the haul was particularly rich the god left them in the lurch.

T'o Chin, recognizing Wang's inclination to tomfoolery and high jinks, gave him a beautiful stag mask with splendid antlers, a mask such as the lamaistical shamans wore at their Cham-dance. Wang Lun was as happy as a child with the thing, romped around the yard and out in the street together with the two sedan bearers; startled visitors, drove them off.

His antics filled half the town. Like when he sat down somewhere in the street, in the middle of a pack of stray dogs, pulled on the stag mask, snarled at the dogs, then made off at their head across busy squares: shrieking of women and children, pandemonium, leaping, barking, running around, and the chase disappeared down an alley where with a kick he conveyed the howling dogs through a

paper window or into a sedan chair and ran on whooping.

One event, momentous in its background, and in its consequences to affect him drastically, made him notorious.

Some Chinese tribes in Kansu, adherents of the Mohammedan faith, had comported themselves in a defiant and rebellious manner. They called themselves the Salarrh of the White Turbans, were divided among themselves; they had been put down with force.

Now everything in any way connected or related to them in other provinces was to be identified, banished and uprooted, long after their leader and all his followers had yielded up their lives. The ground trembled already under the feet of secret leagues who raged against the warrior Emperor and the alien Manchu dynasty, but no one in the proud Vermilion City paid any heed to this dull murmuring, whose voice would later be augmented by the swishing of arrows, the clashing of curved sabres, the unearthly ruddy-white cackle of pillars of fire, the groaning and bursting of collapsing roofs.

In Chinan-fu there lived among other Mohammedan families the family of a certain Su. He made wicks from plant pith; he was a respected, worthy man who had achieved the lowest civil rank. The Su's resided in Unicorn Street, almost opposite Wang Lun's inn, and Wang greatly esteemed the clever, though conceited, man.

The Taot'ai of Chinan-fu established that Su-ko was the uncle of a man who had instigated the first disturbances in Kansu. Constables arrested the manufacturer of wicks, took him and his two sons to the town gaol where he was interrogated daily under torture.

He had spent three weeks in custody before Wang heard of it in his lodgings. At once cold terror coursed through his bones. He conjured up the image of the grave, solicitous man, asked time and again, "But why? What for?"; couldn't rest until he had confirmed for himself that Su-ko really was in prison together with his two sons and was being interrogated every day under torture. And just because that agitator, the one who'd first read aloud from an old book in Kansu, was his nephew.

At midday Wang sat down together with his two friends and three

beggars in the inn and discussed with them what to do. He brandished his two open hands in front of his face in the way he had and said: “Su-ko is an upright man. His relatives and friends are not here, they’re already headless. Su-ko shall not remain in prison.”

The one-eyed beggar told how he had heard in the Taot’ai’s yamen that the provincial judge from Kuangp’ing-fu would arrive in three or four days to sit in judgement on the Su’s. Wang pumped him with excited questions: who’d said it, how many had heard, were preparations already in hand to receive the Nieht’ai, the judge, how many would come with the Nieht’ai. When he heard it was an old judge, appointed specially for this case and unknown in the town, his narrow eyes gleamed scornfully; then he grinned, after a pause laughed out loud so that the chopsticks fell off the table and the other five laughed too, punched one another, melodiously echoed each others’ laughter. A huddle of heads, rapid exchanges of words, frequent furious insistence from Wang. Each went his way.

In two days every yamen runner in Chinan-fu, and thus the whole town, knew that the Nieht’ai coming to give judgement at the pending political trials would arrive the following day, sooner than expected.

Wang Lun and twenty idlers and ruffians he had quickly rounded up in the town had rendered impassable no fewer than three bridges that the envoy would have to cross, had hired formal dress for himself and his accomplices from a pawnshop that owed him and T’o a favour for several cheaply acquired items, and on the given day marched with exaggeratedly stem features into the great city through the same gate that he had passed through a few months before, alone, smiling, with a familiar greeting to the fat gate guard, as if he were just back from one of the many small tea pavilions outside the walls frequented by poets and young gallants.

On this hot morning in the eighth month gongs clashed ceaselessly before him, demanding reverence. Two of the ruffians, halberds at the ready, rode in front on rickety bays, unsteady in the saddle. Behind them marched two gong beating youths with menacing frowns, four minor officials with freshly lacquered insignia of

judicial dignity. And in the blue palanquin, concealed by drawn curtains, a venerable dreaming ancient with a white beard that hung in thick tassels left and right from cheeks and chin onto the shiny black silk robe, almost covering the beautiful breast badge with its embroidered silver pheasant: Wang Lun himself. The round black mandarin's hat was ornamented with the sapphire button.

A small troop headed by an officer brought up the rear, soldiers of the provincial Green Banner regiment. Across squares and crowd jammed marketplaces, his erstwhile haunts, Wang rode between walls of dumbstruck citizenry. The doors of the yamen stood wide open.

The Nieht'ai stayed only half a day in the prefecture. He resolved not to sentence the political prisoners of the Su clan at once, but to take them back to Kuangp'ing and there await the Emperor's response to his report.

Without even lodging overnight in the town, towards evening the exalted bluebutton departed from the fluttering town; on a cart guarded by the soldiers of his train stood a narrow wooden cage. In it, their necks held in a single collar of wood, sat Su and his two sons.

At evening on the following day the runners of the authentic Nieht'ai arrived, conveying complaints from the judge about the poor state of the roads and the police in the district. The monstrous news, becoming known, filled the whole town with horror.

The highest judicial authorities had been made game of. The Taot'ai and all his staff were lost; the Mohammedan inhabitants faced summary justice: the perpetrators must have come from among them. It was quite likely that Imperial displeasure would deny the town for years the right to take part in the examinations.

Wang and his companions meanwhile had removed their disguises in one of the mountain gorges. Su-ko and his sons, already resigned to death, declared brotherhood with Wang. For all their fearful gladness there was no loud rejoicing in the gorge: the three of them had grown frail under torture.

Wang returned to the town next day and took T'o Chin into his

confidence.

The Nieh-t'ai stayed five more days in Chinan to investigate. After his departure at nightfall the priest of the Patron of Music was woken by a light knocking at the door of his room. Su-ko's legitimate wife slipped into the room, covered her weeping face with a thick white veil and sat on the floor unable to speak. Su-ko and his sons had returned to the house armed, refused to conceal themselves; Su declared that if anyone tried to force entry into the house to arrest him, he would strike him down with the help of his sons and his clansmen. On her knees she implored the bonze and Wang Lun to join her in urging her husband and sons back to the mountains.

The woman stayed with the bonze, Wang ran to Su's house. He found the father restored, calm, as dignified as ever but with an unyielding bitterness. Su-ko explained that he would leave the town and the province, but first he would take time to sell his possessions, settle his debts, and consult his priest on a choice of domicile. Wang, head hunched between his shoulders, offered to take charge of the sale and the clearing of obligations, also to arrange the business with the Mohammedan priest. Su declined on all counts.

So Wang Lun decided to shadow him and help him.

Su-ko went early in the morning from house to horrified house, desired to pay his debts and those his wife had contracted in his absence. He asked if anyone knew where he could sell his house at a reasonable price. In the throng that followed close behind him leapt the public jester, the assistant of T'o Chin the bonze, the giant Wang Lun, garrulous and excited.

It was not long before the police came running up. But Wang and his helpers managed to arrange it so that the crowd pressed menacingly with its women and children close about Su-ko. The old man had completed his business, returned unruffled by the shouts from the crowd and from urgent acquaintances to his little house. There followed a drumming and trumpeting. Blue-jacketed soldiers blockaded the street leaving only a narrow passageway, drove bystanders into houses. A lean T'ouszu, a captain, commanded them.

Su-ko came bareheaded from his house, bowed politely to the officer and, not glancing at the soldiers and showing no surprise at his surroundings, proceeded along the house wall on an errand a couple of doors away. The bony T'ouszu sprang behind the slow, portly man, hit him in the small of the back with the pommel of his sabre, pulled him round by the shoulder shouting: Was he Su-ko, the absconded wick manufacturer. Su folded his arms and said: Indeed he was; but who was the T'ouszu? Was he a footpad and a robber? And why did he carry his impudence so far as to hit an innocent man in broad daylight with his sabre pommel and waylay him?

Su had not even finished speaking, when with several sabre blows the officer and two soldiers who sprang to his aid cut him down by the wall.

Wang cried out sharply, as did the others who watched this from the street corners. He wanted to leap forward, but he was trembling, rooted to the spot, his limbs had fallen sudden victim to weakness and paralysis. He swept with the flood of bodies in a zigzag through the squares, not quite conscious. His gaze ran helplessly over faces, over shop signs painted in gold. He could not discern colours. An ever growing anxiety drove him on. Five sabres swept side by side through the air, ten paces from him, in front of his eyes. And then a grey jumble, turmoil.

Su-ko, his grave brother, lay unrescued in the street.

Su-ko was his brother.

Su-ko had not been rescued.

Su-ko lay in the street.

By the wall.

"But where is that wall?"

He was impelled to the little whitewashed wall. Su-ko had only wanted to run an errand. His house was not yet sold; the priest had to be consulted; there was the question of his new domicile to consult the priest on. So he had to go along by the wall. Why had they prevented his brother Su-ko from going along by the wall. Oh, he felt so hot, and he was freezing.

He stumbled trembling into the room where T'o Chin was

expecting him.

When he saw Wang so pale he grasped him about the waist and pulled him, passive, groaning bitterly, twisting his hands, into the temple. There beside the music god's statue he opened a handleless door; they emerged into an area full of rubble and bricks, sat facing the street in a wayside shrine for homeless spirits, a square stone structure in the interior of which a hollow had been excavated large enough for two men to squat crouching in. On the street side stood a wide offering bowl for donations. They climbed in from the building site through a hole covered over with boards.

In the dark, in the stale air they sat for a long while until T'o Chin's flint had taken and the little oil lamp glowed. The bonze was more agitated than Wang, who responded passively, embraced T'o, laid his head on his shoulder. The distraught man then told how Su had been butchered, cried like a refractory child, spoke of the five sabres, and Su-ko was hacked to death. Under T'o Chin's voice he calmed down, breathed deeper and more slowly, and was silently contemplative for a considerable while.

Where could they find a remedy that would let Su-ko his brother stand up again and walk around and get everything ready for his departure? It was all the fault of the flashing that there could be no remedy, that the grave man who had only folded his arms was flung to the ground and dragged along like a dead cat. They were probably killing his sons now. Why had they laid hands on Su-ko? If he had read aloud from the old book like his nephew, it would have been no crime; but no one had ever heard anything from him. And for that they cast down his brother, left his soul no repose. The T'ouszu had wronged him. The T'ouszu had struck him down with his sabre.

Wang half turned away from the bonze's side, whispered that he would flee now; he would come sometimes at night, knock six times on his door. T'o Chin was happy.

Wang's face, when outside he saw the daylight again, streamed with tears. He wept despairing in the space between the broken bricks and the shrine for homeless spirits; he unwound his queue,

tore his thin green smock, gnawed mindlessly at the knuckles of his icy hands. The purse of copper cash that T'o gave him he refused; he clambered round the edge of the shrine, swung himself over the palings, ran off without drying his face.

Wang wandered for six days in the plain, over the hills around the city. On the night of the sixth day he appeared beside the bonze, asked for his stag mask. T'o Chin searched it out, was glad to see his former assistant, rejoiced at his grave determination. Wang held the mask in his hands, stroked it, placed it over his face; the bonze saw how greatly his pupil had changed. Beneath the low, resolute forehead were eyes that mostly looked out sad and full of pain, but sometimes quite intemperately raged wild and blind. And the wide peasant mouth with its upthrust lower lip was no different: often open in a ravening hunger, mostly slack, resigned. The lines of cunning at the corners of the mouth floated there empty and disconnected.

The priest, this mendacious, deceitful creature, became gentle and pious before his pupil and was surprised at the feeling of submission that Wang produced in him.

For the rest of the night T'o sat awake in his room and thought about Wang, who had long since stowed himself with the stag mask in the wayside shrine without saying what he intended to do.

The night faded. Clumps of onlookers gawped and idled at the fence as soldiers performed archery drill in Wanching Square; dust drifted like a high loose curtain over the treeless square. After the archery came gymnastics.

All of a sudden dogs began baying, the people scattered; over the low fence a furious figure in a stag mask paused, ran straight into a troop of soldiers lined up at ease before a vaulting rope, supervised by a lean T'ouszu. The strays, thirty of them, hurtled between the legs of the barefooted soldiers, who ran about laughing, evaded the snapping beasts with curses. The T'ouszu ran roaring up behind the stag-mask, which flicked his ear with a child's whip and then with an astonishing bound set itself beside him, thrust the mask over his head, pressed down on him and laid him on the ground.

On the square it was remarkably quiet at that moment; everyone heard a ghastly groaning and snoring. Already the dreadful bareheaded man was hurling himself into the crowd; a couple of barking dogs followed; in a moment he had disappeared. The big dogs ran whimpering on the sandy ground around the twitching body of the T'ouszu, sniffed at it. The soldiers drove them off with stones. They pulled the heavy antlers off the T'ouszu.

His face was black and puffy. He had been throttled; the vertebrae of his neck had been wrung.

It was no use the soldiers lashing into the onlookers with their whips; the dogs ran about in the nearby alleys. Mothers swept their children, who were sieving sand, from the path of the onrushing soldiers.

It was no use rushing hither and thither. It was no use bursting into houses. At last one of the soldiers found a child's whip, but that was no help: such whips were produced from other houses, where they were used by children to urge on hobby-horses.

Around midday word swept through all the marketplaces, through every shop and alley, the teahouses, taverns and lodging houses, the wide courtyards of the government yamen of Chinan-fu, through the four gates into the millet fields, vegetable gardens, over the mud coloured Tach'ing-ho up into the dark hills: It was Wang Lun, the fisherman's son from Hunkang-ts'un, the town jester of Chinan, who had freed old Su-ko and his two sons disguised as the provincial judge of Shantung, who had tricked the Taot'ai with a rabble of rogues and criminals from the hills of T'ai-shan, with painted shields from a pawnshop, that Wang Lun had avenged his brother Su-ko on the captain of the troop of executioners. With the stag mask that he used to frighten market women, in full view of the spectators in Wanching Square he had throttled the T'ouszu of the provincial regiment in front of his own soldiers.

The subject of the town's gossip climbed this noontime sluggishly up rocky paths into the mountains. Then he lay on the far side of an

inaccessible gorge on loose gneiss, stretched out on his back oblivious of the sharpedged stones. He lay motionless, not lifting his heavy hands, in the sun's glare. Basically he was waiting and probing inside himself to see if everything was now well, if he had made everything well.

The anguish of the past few weeks had become insupportable. It drove him on, from hut to ridge; for four days he ate and drank nothing: he forgot about eating for walking, shutting his eyes, tossing and turning. When thirst pangs grew, he didn't realize that lack of water was parching him; he thought it was misfortune that swelled and scorched in him. The idea often came to him that he must buy new things, because his clothes and skin had been ripped from him. That he was suddenly terribly heavy and terribly big. It tormented him to an extraordinary degree that he was so immovable, wouldn't let himself be pushed from his place, rolled over. It was just like bathing on the distant beach at Hunkangts'un as the tide turned: the strong waves were still lifting him a moment ago, dragging him rolling over the sand; little by little the transparent water receded; his swarthy breast lay dry, his toes peeped out of the water. The sea peeled his arms and legs bare: he lay dripping ponderously on the damp sand and had to prop himself to avoid rolling into the tide.

Nothing bore him up. He lifted his arms, balanced them a hundred times; they wouldn't swing.

In between came the flashing of sabres, so dazzling that he blinked.

He hid from the beggars, thieves and fences. He didn't know how to face them.

Su-ko had been cut down. They had done that to him.

He could feel the overpowering pressure of suffering, in the back of his head, on his tongue, in the hollow of his breast. And it was a violently spontaneous direction he gave to his thoughts when he transposed them to fantasies of revenge, passionless fantasies conjured up to heal, to free him. He poured out his woes to himself: there were good reasons for revenge. But he did not believe himself,

could not believe.

And the desperation rising out of this struggle turned more and more to rage against the T'ouszu whose fault it all was. He feared the T'ouszu as he had shrunk from the flashing of his sabre. But rage against the T'ouszu gained the upper hand, violently hour by hour edged the fear aside. The groans of mindless suffering transformed themselves to groans of a groping, searching, certain hatred. The endless days grew shorter, and one night he ran through the dumb streets of Chinan-fu and sat with T'o in his room. Did not think of the stag's antlers as he tapped on the door. But when he stepped across the threshold he became warm. He thought of the playful mask, and that it was all in the past now; and in the same moment he felt a movement in his muscles: the mask gripped and thrust over the T'ouszu's head, throttled, thrown aside. This was good. He was happy. Thrust it over his head, the mask over the T'ouszu, and then away. Thrust over the T'ouszu's head, then away, away.

The murder had happened just like that, under his playful, delirious hands and arms.

So he lay on the loose gneiss, probed mistrustfully and coolly to see if everything was now well, if enough had happened now.

When he stood up hours later, he found himself calm. As if something was sleeping under his ribs, screened by high cupboards and tables.

It grew dark. A sickle moon stood over the sharp edges of the gorge. He pushed on upwards and sat in a tramp's hut, a half buried wooden structure under an overhanging rock. The hut was empty.

Soon five came creeping with lanterns. They knew of Wang's deed, were proud he had come back to them. A bandylegged footpad offered him the whole jug of heartwarming ginseng that hung around his goitrous neck. They crowed over the lean T'ouszu, leaped in front of Wang miming their idea of the throttling. He drank, stopping up his ears. Then he yelled over their noise, asked them for help. His blood brother Su-ko had not been buried, his body cut in pieces. He, Wang, had to leave early in the morning; they must help him, right now in the night, to conduct a funeral service for his

restless blood brother.

They ran up in groups, more vagabonds arrived from huts farther down. Flitting of white paper lanterns. They bore themselves quietly as if they were in a house of mourning and prayed for their own peace. And they drank.

With drooping back, stare fixed like a widow's, Wang sat on the mud floor beside a low wooden frame, a bier, on which a bundle of cloth, a crude doll, lay. Wang had his knife in his hand, from his loosened queue cut a strand of hair, placed it on the bundle. The oldest of the tramps, a weakminded, good-humoured dodderer with no teeth, a model of griminess, tripped forward to the bier, laid a tealeaf in a scrap of red paper on the doll's mouth. He wound a long shawl made from torn-up trousers around the legs of the corpse so it could not jump up and would rest in peace. From outside they heard in the silence a creaking, scraping, rustling; someone in front of the hut was wildly and unceasingly swinging a huge sackcloth on a strip of wood through the warm air: the soul banner; he was enticing the dead man's spirit out of the night air.

The little old Simpleton bowed endless times in the four celestial directions, called amid leaps and handraisings on Kuei-wang, king of the underworld, commended the newly arrived spirit to him. And all these vagrants, young and old, thrown together by chance, recalled at that moment the festival of the fifth day of the seventh month when a little boat carries the Kuei-wang downstream, the Lord of Demons in his black jacket with the collar of tigerskin, apron and boots of tigerskin, trident in his hand; tufts of his black hair jut far out from under his diadem. And behind him, stiffly, stand the little funny demons, he with the square cap, he with the bull's head, he with the horse face and the ten chubby-cheeked Princes of Hell red as turkeycocks, all there to be stared at.

Carefully four of them carried the bier with the doll outside, Wang in the lead, the others staggering, huddling behind, with the lantern down a short path to the stony field, strewing little balls of flour right and left for hungry ghosts. Lowered the effigy into a shallow grave. Little scraps of paper flared, money for the dead; rags and

tatters smouldered evilly, his suit of clothes.

They climbed back up grunting with the bare planks. The lanterns swayed. Morning greyed over Chinan-fu. When they tramped into the hut, Wang had disappeared.

Fearful of the lictors and fearful of the horrors in Chinan-fu Wang Lun fled northwards. He crossed the borders of Shantung, traversed the plain of Chihli in the autumn, and by way of the narrow Hun-ho and through heavy storms of snow reached the safety of the Nank'ou mountains in northwest Chihli. He avoided all towns. Mostly he was alone. Often he went hungry; earned a few cents when the need was great by carrying loads, hauling coal; but he never stuck at it. Any job repelled him before long. His nature had nothing of his countrymen's vegetable patience. He begged.

When it grew cold and autumn rain soaked through his tattered smock, he fell in with ten footpads. They waited three days and nights outside the county town of Tu-an until a lightly guarded caravan came by, carrying brick tea. They removed quilted jackets from the howling merchants, and with polite mockery let them proceed.

He spent the whole winter in these mountains. They swarmed with hermits, monasteries small and great: the holy mountain Wut'ai-shan was nearby. All winter through, the broad highways and narrow paths were noisy with traffic. Men streamed down from the northern passes with horses, pack mules, camels. They brought gifts, offerings to the more southerly mountains where monasteries reared from colossal bare cliffs. Walls of yellow stone fell sheer away; the processions straggled up twisting carved-out paths into the rarefied air.

Wang Lun endured the hard months by a narrow river with foaming rapids. The river broke through the granite mass; enormous brown surfaces plunged vertically downwards; they tilted, inclining meekly towards the imperious water. Few rocks projected above the black surface; waves spun past them white with spray. Farther east

where the river penetrated the receptive plain the cliffs receded, with new outcrops; in the distance everything levelled off.

Beside a mountain track, under an overhanging boulder covered with evergreen firs, Wang Lun dwelt with a hermit. No rain, no snow fell into their sheltered hut; the icy wind slid shrilly past out of the gorges. On warmer days he descended to where little watermills worked beside the river, stamping mills with sandstone hammers dropping into sturdy mortars, grinding wood and talc for candles. Beggars congregated down there, runaway criminals, idlers, footpads. Wang led a double life. He went restlessly up and down and sat, waiting for something or other, now here, now there. Only fleetingly, with a tightening of his wide mouth, a wrinkling of his low forehead, did he think of Chinan-fu, of the wallgirt town of thousands. Only in his penetrating gaze, which was often fixed quite vacantly, was there still something of a little whitewashed wall, a flashing of sabres, a long, long sitting in a wayside shrine for homeless spirits. His right eye, moving beneath a conspicuously heavy upper lid, twitched slightly and swivelled outwards.

Besides, while still down on the plains he had recovered his insolent, unrestrained playfulness. He toyed with the idea of entering the roofers' guild. He soon had his associates at the watermills under his thumb. His strength and vigour alone were not much use to him in this violent company. The deciding factor was his playful way of manipulating people. This he had learned from old T'o: how to listen, humble and cajoling, draw it out unobtrusively, touch it up slightly in repeating it, substitute, unremarked and with a wonderful openness that simulated honesty, what he himself wanted.

The ruffians he squatted on his heels with all day wavered in their opinion of him. Some of the younger ones didn't take him seriously; they considered him half-crazy, with a dreadful adroitness, a sort of ape man. Wang became vicious when anyone took his tricks ill, let his amiability fall like a mask, uttered nasty threats; when he withdrew blackly, avoided company for days at a time, it only showed them how confused he was. The older ones kept a distance.

They didn't grumble at his childish playfulness; what struck them were the spells, not rare, of weird abstraction. They felt awe in the face of such things. They sensed a heavy suffering in him, and they thought of suffering as a capability, a gift. The lowly people embodied the ancient spirit of the race; more than in the educated there flowed in those whom life had battered, cast adrift, the profound sentiment: "Who tries to conquer the world by action will fail. The world is of the spirit; it should not be disturbed. Who acts, loses it; who cleaves, loses it." Wang gave them a comfortable feeling. They were his followers, in their way were brotherly towards him, almost motherly towards the strongest of them all.

The thin pounding of hammers, the steady gushing of the river rose as far as the hermit's lair. Beside the mountain road, with pious inscriptions engraved at every turning on the rock walls, Wang Lun sat with Ma No.

He had come to Ma one day begging. Wang had expected a bearded man in meditation, who would supply soft words from his store. Instead a highpitched voice assaulted him as he climbed the steps. At the entrance to the hut a hand grabbed at his sleeve, pulled him round. A pointed face came close to his, asked in a barely comprehensible dialect what he wanted. His sharp eyes had meanwhile got used to the gloom. Ma No wore a coat of little coloured patches, laid over each other like fishscales. He was small and slightly bent, moved like an eccentric old man, had a disconcertingly young, fresh face, long beaked nose, fine mouth with orator's dimples, unsure eyes that recoiled from every object like rubber balls. He piped rather than spoke.

At his first glance around, Wang Lun's heart pounded. It reminded him of the dark temple of the Patron of Music Han Hsiang-tzu in a distant town. As he mumbled a few meek phrases and Ma pressed a lump of goat's cheese into his hand he stood rooted, posed questions about the statues on the little shelf. Ma placed himself with his back to them, uttered rapid words that Wang could not follow. The polite, curious beggar calmly asked more questions, concocted some story about a priest in Ch'i. The hermit started, made a wondering face at

the vagabond's learning. Finally Wang explained that he had taken up residence an hour from there, was employed at a stamping mill, asked the wise gentleman to instruct him in the powers of his gods, since he was dissatisfied with his own gods. Grudgingly Ma No offered his strange guest tea.

And that was the beginning of their acquaintance.

The restless man who later shared his house with the runaway from Shantung was a monk who had fled from P'ut'o-shan, that marvellous southern isle.

Silent and mild his Buddhas sat in the rear of the hut. Earlobes extending down to their shoulders; blue hair knotted over round foreheads with the third eye of enlightenment; distant gazes; radiant, almost evanescent smiles on plump full faces, protruding lips; slender hands raised primly to their breasts; squatting on slim round shanks, feet turned sole up like a child in the womb. Ma gave the Buddhas, or Fos as Wang called them, various names; they all looked the same. Only one Buddha was different, whose name had reached even to Shantung: a goddess, Kuan-yin. She stood among the others, carved in rock crystal, innumerable arms writhing from her shoulders like snakes, mouth pursed as tenderly as a soft breeze passing over a meadow.

And with a wrenching jolt Wang heard what these Fos taught: that no man shall kill. Ma No was puzzled by Wang. He laughed at him: the judges taught as much already. Wang, embarrassed, said Yes; but his brows shot up, his right eye rolled spasmodically and swivelled outwards. He nodded: "The Fos teach well. The judges teach well. But only your Fos are right, Ma."

Ma loved the Buddhas helplessly. At times he would shout his ambitious desires, and the desires they had not fulfilled, into their great trumpetmouths of ears, and stand bleating in front of them. At other times despair overwhelmed him; he stretched senseless on the bare stone floor. They gazed out over him with their fleeting smiles. He busied himself with them, felt they were his masters, and the more he busied himself, the less they meant to him.

Yet it had never occurred to him to do as Wang once suggested

when he found the faces of the Most Glorious Perfected Ones covered in thick dust again: load the statues onto a cart, push them to the north side of the road and carefully, one by one, tip the Fos into the rushing river.

Ma hated his guest for this thought. He felt he'd been found out, because Wang seemed to know he couldn't do it. And deep inside he was jealous of this guest who came out so casually with such a monstrous, unheard-of plan and seemed ready to carry it out at once. He cursed Wang at length, lying on the prayer mat in front of the shelf, for Amithaba to hear: what wicked things that man had said, and how he was now controlling himself, suppressing himself, taking refuge in the Law, in the Teaching, in the great pious Fellowship, as the formula ran. He focussed, murmuring the name A-mi-to-fo without stopping, went over himself in rapture like a stalking cat over a path; he saw the path snaking thinly away, a thread that pulled him, over the first rises, then over the four steps of blessedness. Now caught by the current, now turning back, now never turning back, now Arhat, Lohan, sinless worthy regarding with the same eye gold and clay, catalpa and mimosa, sandalwood and the axe that will fell it. And up above, Paradise, where those who would flow together separate, shrink back as from too strong rays: spirits of the finite light, the unconscious, those who feel no pain, the inhabitants of nothingness, and at last those who dwell where there is neither thinking nor not-thinking.

Silent and mild the Buddhas sat on the shelf. Earlobes extending down to their shoulders; blue hair knotted over round foreheads with the third eye of enlightenment; distant gazes; radiant, almost evanescent smiles on plump full faces, on protruding lips; slender hands raised primly to their breasts; squatting on slim round shanks, feet turned sole up like a child in the womb. An hour-long stillness filled Ma's dark hut. If his abbot, the Chanpo, had walked in and taken him by the shoulders like before and regarded the sharp abstracted face with his cold eyes, that quiet, scornful laugh that Ma had heard so often would have followed. Every time, before he could form a question for his wise teacher, the old man walked away

shaking his head. And Ma, shivering, devastated, unwillingly answered his own question as he rubbed his blue cold fingers: one cannot fly to the heaven of the Gods; the sons of Sakya must walk up to the crest, over the four steps, the four difficult steps.

Ma was incapable of walking from the moment he knew where the path led. On P'ut'o, the island, in the Hall of Absorption, a feeling had come to haunt him at the end of a seafarers' Mass that went through him like a stake, soft and unbending at the same time, and twisted slowly inside him. And then came a painful bitter rapture, and then a double waving of silken cloths, red and yellow, one from each side. The cloths, big as shrouds, joined themselves together, rolling in ceaseless motion; he slid down into the hollowness, the hollow centre. His feet were bound with bandages like the feet of a corpse. The draught from the cloths lifted him slightly, and yet he slid on in a straight line. A fan palm came. Something grey, large sped towards him, an egg, a gigantic grey pearl. At the sight of it madness bubbled up in him, he groaned, pulled himself upright, ran over stalks in a field, swam around the pearl wringing his hands and lost himself against it in a lapping wave.

Ma knew nothing of the dream when he awoke. The only sound that echoed in his ears was his groaning. Through such dreams the wave of restlessness drove deeper into him. He began to criticize the regulations of the monastery. Instead of the ever deeper absorption, ever more strenuous overcoming of the Will that the teaching required, he awaited the final highest state like a lover his tryst. And knew with piercing clarity that he deceived himself in every absorption that the golden Buddhas were so far from him, so inscrutable.

But he had to attain them if he were not to suffer endless rebirths; he had to reach the Shore of Salvation if he were not to drown. That was what the Tha-mo drilled into him, the good Law of the Worlds, of breathing beings, of the destruction and renewal of worlds. He ran one day to the beach; a boatboy ferried him across; his wanderings began. During ten years of wandering through the

provinces of Anhui, Kiangsu and Honan nothing had changed in him.

Ma No kept clear of monasteries now. He passed the years aimlessly, pushing his barrow with the Buddhas like a kaki-hawker, until at last he settled by the mountain road near Nank'ou Pass. He prowled around holy Wut'ai-shan, could not tear free of things from which only his inadequacies excluded him. The fisherman's son from Hunkang-ts'un quickly became for him a deeper source of contemplation than the hundred and eight figures on the soles of Sakyamuni's feet and the eighteen conditions of unattachment. This fellow who dogged his every step was quite clearly one of those vagabonds that the demobilized army had flooded the province with. He intruded on his host. His questions, his fixating stare offended. What offended Ma No most was the way Wang treated the Buddhas: at first like one of those coarse Chinese towards his employees or lawyers, praising them or sending them away after some job well done; later with an obtrusive intimacy that tormented Ma. Tormented him because he felt that it was useless to inveigh against it, that Wang had unaccountably established contact with these silent, mild beings.

Jealously Ma shut up his hermit's cell for days at a time, refused entrance to his familiar guest, in there in front of the shelf aped Wang's lip-pursings, head-bowings, calm squinting. When he felt no access of peace he hurled reproaches at Wang, spat on his own feet for being so stupid as to let the petty jealousies of the monastery in again. To think that this net mender knelt on the bamboo mat in front of the shelf as if Ma No was just a temple keeper, before the Buddhas that Ma had trundled with him ten years through the endless provinces of Anhui, Kiangsu, Honan, this footpad, who for sure had a man's death on his conscience.

A struggle developed between him and Wang, a chewing over of reproaches, slow brimming antagonism. Wang kept coming back. He could never hear enough of sutras and sayings from holy books. Willy-nilly Ma No had to give him more; the hulking fellow just nodded as if he took it all for granted. Ma No thought such

behaviour shameless, and he wrung his thin hands, gave himself for lost in his own home, was inhibited from bolting the door against Wang. When the ruffian crouched on the grime crusted mat, repeated teachings in his awkward manner, the little monk sat down breathless beside him, anxiously put out fingers to touch him, sniffed at him. Twice in a passion he showed Wang the door.

It was a still moment, one that caused the mountains around Ma No to recede, when one evening after Wang left Ma found himself doing something remarkable. He was observing the snowladen sky in a deliquescent absorption, when all at once he knew that he was Wang's inferior and did not mind. Suddenly that night the memory of his absorption rose before him. Dull astonishment at this state of affairs: and did not mind. He was Wang's inferior and did not mind. The feeling crawled tightly over his skin, turned his heart to a feather; tenderly, appetizingly, the thought in him went out towards Wang with kneebending abasement: "Oh, how good it is to be Ma No."

Only for minutes.

Then he checked himself, warily stifled it all, laid himself down in front of his body and dispersed the feeling.

Was aghast finally at himself and the whole incident. Dragged himself into sleep.

Could not face Wang the next few days; was ashamed to see him; stabbed and bit himself. But this image persisted in him undisturbed: *Snowladen sky, and I am Wang's inferior*. It emerged from his breast and pulled him along behind it, growing, growing. He considered for several nights if he shouldn't go wandering again. Stayed, to his own astonishment. Approached Wang abjectly. Their peculiar conversations resumed. Days followed when Ma No became impatient if the vagabond didn't come tramping in, when he tried to find out what he was doing, hurried in search of the outcast gang.

The priest taught the vagabond with a sense of unease. Everything in him was prepared for abdication.

An icy cold spell set in at the start of the New Year. The cliff paths became too slippery to use. On the high hills snow lay like a quilt in layers many feet thick. If anyone stepped in the white mass it did not compress softly; it clinked gently like a thousand slate. The snow cut hands. The air, at first of a deep green transparency, took on a grey hue.

A Mongol caravan wending its way from the northern passes progressed as far as the Nank'ou mountains. In one night thirty-five mules froze; in the morning two bears sat immovable with threatening bloodshot eyes beside a horse, which had either frozen to death or been torn to pieces alive. Balls of tea and silk, huge skins were left lying on the final pass. The pilgrims wintered in a village farther back.

After this caravan no one came over the road to Wut'ai-shan. It was enough to congeal blood, split mountains. The stamping mills stopped work. The river, narrower than usual, blew air through its valleys that was thick enough from cold to choke on.

The footpads and criminals had infiltrated some of their number into villages that lay east and west of the mountains. The others stayed for a little while on the pilgrim trails that were their living. Then everywhere small and large bands gathered together in desperation. The paths behind which the caves and huts of the homeless were tucked would soon be unclimbable; then there would be no forward and no back.

The band to which Wang belonged took refuge in several twisting narrow caves, protected from the wind, along the road above Ma's hermitage. They were about fifty strong. But two days later, after five of them had gone in search of starving, freezing comrades along the still passable roads, hillsides, valleys, they grew to eighty. There was no long debate. The nine most respected decided that the little village of Pat'a-ling, about six hours' trek away, should be plundered and taken over.

During the downward climb the same thought occurred to several of them and spread among the others: none of the villagers should be allowed to slip away. They must either be locked up or killed.

From the band, which not far from the village had happened on another clueless little group of thirty, there came as it ran down a continuous yelling, collapsing, pleading to be helped along. The stronger ones held their mouths open from hunger and bit the wind; they ran blindly. They took turns to carry the older and lighter vagabonds on their backs. They ran the last part of the way through an undulating valley completely silent, in a long line that thickened towards the rear, the strongest like windhounds in front, heedless of those behind.

The village had fifty houses lying along a single street, except for four houses that stood around an evergreen oak where the road from the hills entered the village. It was from these houses that the people first saw the leaping of men over the cliff known as Shen-yi, the falling and rallying of more and more men. They approached rapidly across the blue-white snow; they looked as if they were being chased. Their queues flew out behind, could be seen swinging like whips over their shoulders.

The wife of peasant Lei was the first to yell from her yard: “Bandits! Bandits! Bandits!” Women, children, then men with beds behind them ran down the village street, banged on doors, disappeared into houses. Whimpers and screams swirled over the houses, borne from roof to roof, trembled along the empty road.

From the hills the pattering came nearer, an irregular crackling and rasping, extended movement that seemed not even to take breath. Livid faces with immobile features, hands swinging to and fro like clubs. Bodies that ran insensibly. Torsoes sitting stiffly on hips, as if riding horses. Behind the long line of single runners black groups swam, hand clutching hand. Disconnected stragglers whirled arms like hammers, smashed holes in the wall of air before them.

The few villagers who remained at their doors watching the long wedge sweep onwards also saw the black cawing swarm of birds that had left the mountains with the vagabonds.

The first robbers hurled themselves like rocks against doors. They jumped up behind each other, pushed forward. The next arrivals to the neighbouring door. They overran each other. The screaming

faded; from the mountain-runners in the houses poured icy cold and the horror of the dying. They couldn't open their jaws, their eyes didn't blink. The last houses were barricaded. A howling rose outside, a bellowing of wounded beasts, so that the women crawled into hiding places. The living outside lifted fallen bodies clear and ran their headshaking torsoes against the wooden bars. Then suddenly the peasants opened the doors, felled the whimpering scarecrows with axes, ran to neighbouring houses, hacked at wheezing mouths. Stragglers, the strongest, carrying the lame on their backs, raced into the village, dumped their loads in the first yard, followed the screams, crushed the peasants like missiles, throttled them, smashed their children onto the street, wordlessly, with no change of expression.

The dead froze thin and stiff on the road.

The rabble pressed trembling into the houses. These toughs embraced and stroked each other. Strong and weak succumbed to a shuddering. They broke out in a dull snivelling that they couldn't shake off even hours later. They devoured blubbing whatever they found. Not a finger was lifted against anyone in the houses.

As darkness fell, twenty of the younger ones went from house to house distributing axes, flails, telling off night watches.

The band's plan was to stay in the village as long as the worst of the cold weather held, then pull out together. The inhabitants were apprised of this. It was not possible to notify the village headman; he had been slain with all his family.

They had no cause to fear treachery during this time. The nearest place lay six hours off, and the road was impassable.

For a whole month the village was completely cut off. Among the bandits a sense of brotherhood developed. At this time Wang attained the power over these hundred men that his role as chief demanded. In the daily quarrels, regulation of dealings with inhabitants, detailing of watches, the necessary scouting parties, his physical strength and careful diplomacy prevailed; the esteem of the

older people pushed him to the fore.

Before two weeks were up the footpads were promising themselves that after pulling out of the village they wouldn't split up, but would press on under Wang's captaincy in search of a more comfortable life. Wang left them one morning, disappeared into the mountains for two days.

He ran to Ma No, found him cheerful, buried under piles of covers and tow, lying grinning in a corner of his hut; brought him rice, beans, teal eaves.

When he returned he spoke a lot with the older men, day and night. That they were poor outcast wretches. That no one should do to them what they themselves didn't do to others. That nothing was more terrible than men killing each other, and the sight was unbearable. Ma No, the hermit from P'ut'o-shan, had told him many good and precious things about the golden Buddhas, especially about lady Kuan-yin who had a thousand arms on each shoulder and gave women babies. They were his friends, and should do as he did. Fate alone had brought them so much suffering already, so much suffering; who could say why Heaven hated them? When the cold spell eased he would go through the villages and tell everyone, even the mandarins, what he thought. He was set on that.

Those who knew him from the stamping mills were not in the least surprised to hear him speak in this vein; they expected such talk from his lips. They had no thought of turning away from him. His views completely agreed with theirs. Heaven hated them; why should anyone make it worse.

They were a gregarious lot, with definite ideas about all kinds of things, worldly wise, in many respects a cut above the average of their countrymen. There were hardly five among them who did not consider themselves driven out, downtrodden, or have the impression of leading an unfree, constrained life.

Many were victims of a strong impulse that they could not control, indeed did not want to control, who summoned up and sharpened all their cunning in the service of this impulse with which they identified themselves. There were opium smokers, gamblers

with faces of some refinement, elderly men. Not a few had a trade, cheated on and off, were found out and punished, now felt themselves hounded by the police, allowed trick to pile on trick, spite on spite, overstepped the bounds and at bottom were glad to be free as a bird with one stroke, flown from an oppressive legality. These were the fortunate, who felt little bitterness in their freedom.

The worst in this regard were the hotheads, the vengeful, unbridled. They had allowed themselves, mostly young, to be dragged onto a fateful path because of an ambition, a romance, a jealousy, stood apart from their family, clan, neighbours, among whom their impulses like their crimes were a sin, went around with evil looks, cursed themselves, chewed on the inseverable rubber of their suffering. Nothing served them well; they were capable of anything; they were to be left alone. They were close tongued, always there when something was going on or planned, gave vent to their cruelty where they could, were closely watched by their fellows.

Then there were many who waited, who had attached themselves only to have somewhere in the Eighteen Provinces to live. They were discharged soldiers, still dressed in ragged blue tunics and hopeful of re-enlistment. Cripples from little hamlets unable to support them, who now thronged the pilgrim routes. Fit, serious men who had lost families in floods; the kind for whom a failed harvest was a yearly guest; the kind who at first, as a temporary expedient, went in shame to the far mountains to beg, then could not break loose and saw no way out.

There were rare, striking phenomena, Wang Lun among them: restless souls never long in one place, who turned up here as everywhere among trusted comrades and disappeared. Many such man-ripples passed over the face of the vast Empire.

The hard, immovable kernel of all the mountain-runners comprised four or five old criminals who had plagued the higher roads and passes for years. They were amiable, rather false men, who had a fund of anecdotes to tell, listened good-naturedly to others, played crude tricks on the younger fellows. One in the

fullness of his figure had the appearance of a mandarin; only the button was missing from his cap. He placed great store by respectful behaviour, and had a comical habit of responding to the most trivial communication with ceremonial politeness; if interrupted at this he was liable to break out in unspeakably common abuse. He was a hypochondriac, terribly self-pitying, and spent most of the money he got from stealing and robbing on little herb women, hawkers in nearby villages that he frequented in search of medicines. He had a mass of peculiarities, carved very delicate tobacco boxes with flowery lids, sought from every newcomer information on the latest novelties in the towns, went to unbelievable lengths, when he wanted and it was necessary for him, to obtain samples. To his hawker women, who treated him like a fine gentleman, he sighed at how a poor man had to take his own skin to market, even when he only wanted some trifle. At break-ins he was the toughest, surest of men, with muscles of steel, indefatigable patience and coolness. People, especially young men, who took him by surprise so he had to attack them disgusted him if they did not defend themselves, or asked for mercy after he seized hold of them. Once two shop assistants cried out in fear on their brickbed when he burst into their room at night; first he stunned them with an iron bar; then when the brawny fellows, despite his orders, kept on whimpering under the blankets he strangled them one after the other with best quality cord, ran like mad back to the mountains without taking anything. From then on he was known as “Silken Cord”.

Another of the five was a big bony Cantonese with hornrimmed spectacles. This one liked neither killing nor break-ins; he was a scholar and wrote poetry, social and moral treatises, observations on all manner of topics including the animal world, geology, astrology. His nature remained forever alien to most of the vagabonds. He kept himself quite aloof from them; they came to his cave for advice on all kinds of matters, particularly illnesses and lucky days. He was a man of a certain education, who could quote from many authors and write neat characters. Every few months a change came over this big peaceful man. His visitors noticed the

signs: he no longer listened patiently to them; his normally rather tidy dwelling in the cliffside was in disorder. He explained, when anyone asked him, that he was busy with his own affairs, just for a few days; they shouldn't be put off; he would give his thorough attention to the matter they were consulting him on later, and let them know. Then came a few days when the bandits couldn't hold back their laughter, when the learned man climbed muddy and tattered up and down over all the paths, addressed all his acquaintances with a flood of pompous incomprehensible words and scraps, interspersing them lavishly with outrageous obscenities such as otherwise were never heard from him, and couldn't stop laughing, so that his face was buried under a thousand dry wrinkles. On these excursions, when he allowed himself no rest, slept barely two hours a day with no sign of exhaustion, his gaunt figure hid sometimes on a moonlit night behind a rock by a bend in the road, fell with loud shouts on entire caravans, which more often than not scattered before him; after stalking a solitary pilgrim for some distance, growling with fury, pushed him with a shout of triumph into the gorge; behaved swinishly to women and children in the little market towns. After a day or two he sat once more in his cave, earnestly showed his guests the chaps and chilblains he had acquired. He treated these outbreaks for the first few days as something holy, quickly resumed his old ways, the scholarly work, and woe betide anyone who reminded him of his derangement.

These men had little influence on the others; they weren't even very close among themselves. The others considered them dangerous eccentrics, not amenable to any common purpose.

The vagabonds spoke furtively about Wang Lun in the overheated kitchens of the village. His prolonged visits to the sorcerer Ma No made them shiver. Everyone conceded that there was more to it than met the eye. He was on the run, persecuted, found nowhere safe. A hunchback who shared the same house as Wang thumped the table: "Something happened to this Wang in Shantung. He's gone to learn how to exorcize ghosts and get his revenge on someone. There's a fellow up on Liangfu-shan who has the demons of the whole

province sealed up in jars." Another agreed: "Ma No's lived up there a long while. He knows all the mountain spirits. What does Wang want from him?" The hunchback: "I watched him at the mills once. He was swatting his hands about in front of his eyes. Why? He saw demons and wanted to crush them." An old man leaned across the table and smirked: "He's a scholar, is Wang Lun. He carries something about with him. What's so strange if he can do magic? Who knows the one knows the other."

Thoughtfulness and resolve crept over Wang under the influence of his conversations with Ma No. He grew calmer. The walls and curtains that screened off something dark inside him fell away. He smoothed himself, mastered himself with the greatest stealth. The seesaw in him appeared only occasionally: in practical jokes that got on the others' nerves, in hourlong spells of apathy with no cause; in transient spite, obstinacy. The older vagabonds knew that something holy lay behind the tricks he played, that it was no different from rolling around in a fit.

Towards the end of their stay in Pat'a-ling, Wang stomped one evening shivering into the kitchen. He laughed, yelled, jumped about the room. In a drift of fresh snow, completely freshly fallen white snow, he'd found—they should just think, just imagine it—an enormous locked leather bag with the Imperial war seal; and when he felt inside it he had lots of round gold nuggets in his hand. He threw a black bag onto the table. Ten smooth shaved pigtailed heads cracked together over the bag, a happy startled jabbering arose. One of them grabbed, and had coaldust up to his elbows; another felt carefully inside, with the same result. And so with two more. They stared puzzled at each other in sheepish silence across the table with the oil lamp, blinked at the tall figure of Wang lounging calmly by the brickbed, looked from one to the other and back again, shook the coaldust from their hands. A fat albino lifted the bag to his ear, shook it, listened. The four who had felt inside the bag shoved forward and laid their heads against it. The albino put the bag down on the table, shrank back, said without looking at Wang, "He's right. Wang's right." He was so confused he didn't do what it occurred to

another of them, the hunchback, to do: namely, without touching the bag, ask Wang to show them the Imperial seal and check whether it was a seal of Ch'ien-lung or of some earlier emperor. But what if he didn't feel like showing it to them. If he still had something to say to them about the seal, and about the gold nuggets. They were startled, very startled, of course they were; he was too; but they'd listen gladly, and tell the others.

Tall Wang Lun had long since stopped smiling. His face growing ever more agitated he stood by the brickbed. The wide left leg of his trousers was singeing on the grill, but he didn't notice, paid no attention to the smell of scorching. He went slowly and quite hesitantly from one to the other, pulled each one by the hand into the light, gazed searchingly into his face: "What is it? What is it then? What do you think?" He leaned both hands on the edge of the table, standing behind the table, eyed the bag from all sides, bent down, stroked it fearfully. Then he wrapped his left hand around it, took it into the next room, all the while casting glances at the men left and right as if he thought they might hit him. He left a thin trail of coaldust behind him. Tall Wang bolted the door and squatted down in the little room, which contained only jars, empty barrels and farm tools, turned a hatchet in his right hand, placed it carefully beside him. Then he lifted the almost empty leather bag in his outspread hands up to his sweating face and dropped his head onto his raised knee. He said out loud, through chattering teeth, for them to hear next door, "What is it then, what do you want of me?" His clothes stuck to his limbs. He stood up, noticed the hole in his trouser leg. Such a silent dizzying fear took hold of him that he turned around in circles, stared at the wooden planks under his felt soles, passed his hands over the floor, pressed bent fingers to the wall.

He stood up, his back slumped into a corner, hugging his arms tight inside the wide long sleeves; considered with staring eyes what had happened to him. Suddenly everything died away in him. He trod calmly through the jumble of implements to the open window. The air was biting. Wang Lun, his head stuck outside in the darkness, didn't know what he looked at. The little houses over there

were far away, the sky's blackness was no farther. He observed everything with astonishment.

He pulled his tunic close around him, drew his head down between his shoulders and went back next door where five of the vagabonds sat playing shadows. They noticed how fixed his look was, how expressionless his face. He stood by the table. He said softly to the hunchback, embracing him but not directing his gaze higher than his shoulders, that he was going to walk through the village once more.

And then he went through the empty street, turned back, went farther up the hill. Ran as he broke through the blackness of the night, skin after skin, shell after shell. Before he realized what was happening his arms had started swinging like clubs, a sickle sprang from his forehead and he was slicing the night with it. He leapt over the cliff known as Shen-yi. His body ran on, already without feeling; he rode breathing gently on feathered shanks. He was glad that something had taken him up and was running away with him. Over the hills, up to the crags. To Ma No, to Ma No. Surely he could hear the chamois leaping towards his hut out of the recumbent night.

There was still no sign of morning in the sky when Ma No heard his name called, ran down the steps leading to his hut.

The smoky wick puttered. Silent and mild his Buddhas sat in the background. Earlobes extending down to their shoulders; blue knotted hair; distant gazes; evanescent smiles on protruding lips; squatting on slim round shanks. Wang lay with his forehead before the thousand-armed goddess of rock crystal, accusing, begging, distraught. Willed that he should stay lying here, not go away. Confusedly stammering what had happened to him.

"What happened to Su-ko is nothing to this. They cut Su-ko down with five sabres by the little wall. They took him prisoner and then sent him over the Nai-ho. I've been lured, trapped in their midst, bewitched. They want to charm a demon into my breast, the hunchback wants to, they all want to. I've been good to them, stopped all their quarrels. A lot of them wouldn't be alive but for me. I went down the village street. The bag had coal in it. It's not my fault it was only coal. And there wasn't any gold or any seal.

How could there be gold, how could the Emperor's seal have got into the leather bag? Why do they ask that of me? They shouldn't want it, they shouldn't want it. They ought to let me go again, I said nothing about the leather bag. I'm Wang Lun from Hunkang-ts'un. I'm a murderer; no mandarin will help me now. I won't let them set me on. You must help me, you five Fos. Ma No, help me, pray with me, help me persuade them."

He raised himself on his knees, held fast to Ma No, who had dropped down beside him. "Or am I already bewitched? Tell me, Ma No. I've left it too late, haven't I, it's too late now."

Turning from the Buddhas he uttered long howling cries, again and again flung his arms wide and smote them together. "What will happen, Ma No? What will happen to Wang Lun? Evil spirits have possessed him. Wang Lun's been possessed by evil spirits."

Ma No prised himself loose from Wang's clenched fingers, let him slide to the ground, placed a thin yellow redbordered cloak over his patchwork gown, put on the square black cap, the Roof of Life, banged the rattlestick, shook the clappers. The piping words he uttered were drowned in the tinny jangling; and as he invoked with curses the foul snake gods, the Nagas and Lus and their kings, as under the dinning of the clappers the Garuda birds whirred up charmed out of the circle, the green fluttering Garudas with the red breasts of men, white bellies, two horns projecting from their black birdheads, Ma No's heart trembled with joy. Himself in a dream he danced enraptured around Wang, who bowed his head. He understood everything Wang said. He bent down, stroked his shoulders, his skull, managed to transform his snarling and hissing into laughter. Wang recalled his father and mother, and how his mother fell asleep as his father leapt about in a tiger mask yelping like a dog in front of her and wheezed and whispered over the unconscious body. He felt frozen suddenly under the shoulders, in the knees, the heels.

He lay dizzy, stretched full length on the floor. Ma heaped covers over him, snuffed out the light. White brightness entered through the pasted-over window. A scraping and scratching at the bolted door,

feet and beaks of hungry crows. Then came a soft running over the steps, crawling over the low roof, a weaselish sniffing and snuffling away over the rafters. Every moment there came a crashing from far off; distant shoving, sheering, rumbling followed. Snow masses came with a lurch, plunged into the gorges.

Ma No in his sulphur yellow cowl with a red border, four-pointed cap on his head, opened the door. The booming of the river surged into the stuffy room where the clapper was now silent. Dazzling white reflected off the snow masses. Ma whistled and ducked. He held the big begging bowl in his hand, full of grains and crumbs. Crows uttered furious cries. He kept the importunate birds back with shrill laughter. Far over the slope, onto the deep snow hiding the road the hard scraps flew.

Although on the first evening Wang was already anxious to be gone, Ma No detained him on the mountain for three more days. On the morning of the fourth day men knocked at Ma's door, five robbers from the village. They were looking for Wang; brought news that they'd been betrayed: the previous afternoon thirty horsemen despatched from the sub-prefecture of Chatuo under the command of a gigantic Patsung had swooped on the village. With the villagers' help they'd driven off the soldiers, lamed a horse, but hadn't been able to prevent four elderly footpads, one of them a sick man, from being seized and carried off by the soldiers on their horses. By the time they noticed the abduction the horsemen were already at full gallop, shooting arrows behind them. The brothers were all for pulling out, they reported. The well-meaning inhabitants too advised them to leave quickly, otherwise both bandits and villagers were done for. All the roads were easily passable, the weather tolerable, spring was coming early.

Three of the men sent to the hermit's lair were close friends of Wang from the stamping mills. They were the most experienced, most dependable men.

Yielding to Wang's agitated entreaties they stayed almost half a

day together in Ma No's hut.

Wang could hardly control himself. He went helplessly in a tumult of feelings across to the low, glowing hearth above which a kettle hung on a rough, badly trimmed oak branch. His broad face shrivelled in the heat. He turned and his flapping sleeves brushed against the golden Buddhas, whose entrancing, glimmering, iridescent features gazed out at silent Ma No, who tried to catch their eye, at the wanderer Wang, the five squatting vagabonds with their heads together slurping tea, gossiping disparagingly of places round about. They were wrapped in layer upon layer of ragged clothing, were barrels of cloth, barely mobile packages of meat.

With an unbearable seething welling in his breast Wang staggered down the steps, and his narrow slanting eyeslits blinked, dazzled by the rebounding whiteness. He stood at the side of the mountain road. Shreds of mist slid out of the valley. Caught by an eddying draught they rose swiftly, sinuously and blew in broad veils over Wang and the long mountain road. The booming rapids sounded unbelievably close. The valley boiled cold and was filled with bubbling vapour. Soft unmuscled arms of snow stretched up out of it.

They took counsel in the barely manhigh hut under the rock. Ma No with his sharp withered face, patchwork gown, tightly wound queue, polite, slightly condescending, strutting inwardly, expectantly excited. Wang, at the hearth with the others, hunched his back; his look wandered from one pair of eyes to another.

He began to speak, to stretch out his hands, to implore his friends: "The horsemen have taken our four comrades away, they'll be thrown in prison and have their heads chopped off. They couldn't run as fast as you. I carried the cripple on my back when we were running down from the mountains. No one will believe them, how wretched we were and the frost was so bad. The cripple believes it, because a boatman broke his leg. What terrible luck, they'll bury him in an inauspicious place, his spirit will have to beg just as it starved and froze in life. His leg was too short, and the soldiers had horses. They take everything from us. We're supposed to freeze to death in these desolate mountains, the crows have had their fill of us, no one

could survive, there weren't any caravans for food. They're taking our poor brothers from us. Oh we are wretched."

Thus Wang Lun lamented, looked all of them in their sad downcast faces, and suffered. Suddenly the fear came again, that estrangement from them. He turned away, gulped on the lump at the back of his mouth. He forced it down, held his icy sweating hands over the hearth. They weren't doing anything to him, they didn't want anything from him, it was all just talk, he had nothing to ask them. Oh, life was hard. And then it flashed in front of his eyes; now like sparks scattering from the hearth, now merging so quick and sleek, five sabres and a little whitewashed wall.

A broadshouldered old man, one of the envoys, a peasant whose land and family had been washed away, maintained his resolute expression at Wang's tremulous words. "We must get our brother back. Since you carried him down into the village, Wang, you must fetch him back again. If we'd had bows and horses like the soldiers, nothing would have happened. The Sub-prefect in Chatuo is supposed to be a clever man from Szechuan. But he's too well bred for us here in Nank'ou. Come, Chu, Ma No, something must come from all this talk."

"Sub-prefect Liu of Chatuo," interposed a big young man next to him, with a strikingly fair complexion, large sharp eyes, "he comes from Szechuan, but this miserable Hsü knows where he got his taels from. He didn't pick them out of the canonical books; the songs of the *Shih-ching* don't wear gold chains around their throats. I heard of a great city called Kuangyuan once when I was wandering beyond the Tapa-shan. Into the yamen of the magnificent Sub-prefect came a courier from the Viceroy of Szechuan; new taxes must be levied from so and so on such and such, for the war. This miserable Hsü knows what answer the magnificent Liu sent back to the exalted Viceroy, because as a matter of fact I laid the returning courier in the dust in order to secure a few cash for myself before venturing into so great a city. Liu had such a fatherly love for the city he declined to impose the tax on Kuangyuan: 'The city is too poor, smallpox is raging, the price of rice beyond the means of the

common man.' But when I personally entered those happy gates two days later, struck all of a heap at such humanity, lovely long notices were pasted up on every wall with the stamp of the magnificent Liu and a plain but dignified text. He let the mighty Viceroy have the first word: 'Son of Heaven, war with so and so.' And to end up, taxes on this and that, donations from everyone, this guild, that guild. Suddenly the people knew the worth of everything in their city walls, this, that and the other. They were so happy and praised Liu for his noble service in promoting their city so well, praised his parents and grandparents and for three years paid the likin contributions to—Liu, the wise Sub-prefect."

The light-complexioned man laughed like a drunkard. Ma looked severely at him; Wang knew there was no holding Hsü. One of those next to Wang jogged his neighbour, whose face glowed from the hot water, whispered to him to speak up; that was better than cursing under your breath outside other people's windows.

Wang was gripped by his pain, was being held by iron hands drowning under a thick dark bog. It was all wrong, what they were saying here.

While the two men next to him gesticulated awkwardly, harangued each other and Hsü launched braggingly into a new story, Wang started to moan, pulled Ma No next to him on the floor. He spoke in helpless gasps, turned his head, his lips quivered: "Ma, sit down here. Don't be upset, dear brother. Hsü, you're a good lad, it's right what you say. I don't want to weary you, but something came to me as Hsü told us about the Sub-prefect of Kuangyuan in Szechuan, who's robbed us of our four poor companions. For sure we shan't let him, dear children. Don't doubt me on that, dear children. Something just came to me, from Shantung, when I was in the city of Chinan-fu, in that great city, and served a bonze, his name was T'o Chin. You won't know him, he was a good man, he looked after me well. I want to tell you about Su-ko, that was his name. Then you'll see why I can't leave those four poor men in the Sub-prefect's hands. Not after what happened to me in Chinan-fu, not after they struck down my friend Su-ko. He was a follower of the Western god

Allah, who's said to grant much to his followers. But disturbances broke out in Kansu when these people suddenly wanted to pray aloud, and Su-ko's nephew was the first to read aloud out of an old book, and they chopped him into pieces with his family. Then they came to look for my friend in Chinan-fu, he was such a grave dignified man, he'd passed the highest examinations. It fell out as it must. They caught him again after I'd already freed him and his two sons. He told them they had no need to worry about him, he was leaving to settle elsewhere, but first he had to pay his debts and sell his house and his priest had to choose an auspicious day for him. But drums came. A lizard, a white tiger, a thinshanked T'ouszu hit him from behind with his sabre pommel, outside his house by a little whitewashed wall. And then when he turned round they hacked him down with five sabres.

"You mustn't laugh because I did nothing to help. His spirit must have flown out of his body into my liver, because for days I was possessed. And this happened in Chinan-fu, to my own friend. The T'ouszu is no longer alive, I can assure you of that. But it makes you weep, going unaided across the Nai-ho. They keep coming back and taking something away. They give you no rest and no peace. They want to exterminate me and you and all of us and not let us live. What shall we do, dear children? I, your friend Wang from Hunkang-ts'un, I'm already like trampled flesh, like stinking rags. I can only weep and moan." Wang had assumed the posture of a sick child before Ma No, and his breast heaved with groans, gasps and sobs.

Water streamed from his eyes and nose, his broad coarse-skinned face was all small and girlish. He leaned against Ma No in a kind of daze.

What he said of Su-ko was no lie. In killing Su-ko they had torn a friend from him. Wang the street runner and pious barker of Chinan-fu had met the Mohammedan in his inn. The grave, tranquil being captivated him, attracted him more strongly than he realized in the city's restless bustle. He suddenly had a quite indistinct feeling of having met here something fateful, something so profound that he

had to turn away from it. He seldom came together with Su-ko and his two sons; their talk touched only on everyday matters. Then came Su-ko's arrest, and the fearsome strength of his relationship with this man revealed itself. Not that he formed any conception of what his contact with the Mohammedan meant: he only noticed his fascination and his complete involvement in Su's fate. Wang had a leaden feeling that he himself, something horribly secret within him, was being attacked. And it was not the crudity of the attack that alarmed him, but horror at the secret which rose up before his eyes, which he did not want to see, not yet, later perhaps, much much later. The five sabres and the little wall merged before his eyes, always anew, every hour, every minute, it was unbearable, it must be covered over, buried.

And so vengeance for Su emerged as something thoughtout, forced. Only when he had the stag mask in his hands, in the bonze's room, and fled at the powerful smell of the mask into the memories that rose up in him of pranks, of careering through market places, balancing across roofs, only then did he know for sure that he would kill the T'ouszu, would use the mask with a quick firm gesture to thrust everything down. At the time this movement made him happy and secure. Thrust down. Once again he wanted to delude himself about the future which he faced with shame and horror. He really did not need to climb out of the wayside shrine that morning and run to the drill square: during the night he had already throttled the captain ten times, fifty times with the mask, it had all happened already. But still he ran; he had to see it for himself, impress it firmly on himself. And so the murder took place, as a sacrifice that he offered to himself. Thus did Wang avenge the Mohammedan, his friend.

The sharp dispassionate voice of the man who had earlier been jostled by Wang's neighbour rose above the confusion of hissed fury and curses. The man nearest the door, he cried, should go around the hut and check if anyone was outside; then he would speak. When the door was heaved open and a tall young fellow with his head thrust forward disappeared outside the hut, it was silent for a minute

inside so that for the first time they heard the boom of the river and the plunging masses of snow. The young man came back in grinning: there was only something dead sitting near the hut. And he pulled a grey-brown civet pelt from under his shirt. Ma No shuddered in revulsion; he wanted to kick the fellow out, mastered himself and snuffled excitedly when he saw the over-earnest faces of the others.

The man at the hearth, from whose chin a little grey beard sprouted, stood up, stationed himself at the door which he barred with his back, spoke softly, sharply, gesticulated strangely as if he were catching flies. He plucked at his beard. His ancient face with its large eye pouches was lively as a purring tomcat's. The slack skin did not detract from the play of his expressiveness: it rippled, flashed, rolled over the flat face with its prognathous jaw. Often he snapped his teeth together; they could see his little pink tongue curling, he bent his thickly padded back, crooked one knee or the other. It was known that he had left his home and a position of respectability for no reason. He had lived for years in the Nank'ou mountains, performed honourable services in the villages. People from his home town who were pestered by curious vagabonds for information about him reported with a shake of the head that he had dropped everything without the slightest cause. They were convinced that the old man had anticipated the discovery of a crime which in the event was not discovered, a story they found very amusing and which threw light on his timorous and secretive nature.

Chu spoke softly, "Since no one is listening at the door, your servant will speak. We must not breathe a word of it, good sirs, not out of fear and anxiety, I mean, which are not at all appropriate to people who have nothing to lose, but for reasons. Your servant Chu has good reason to speak softly and bar the door, and when you have heard him patiently, good sirs, and find yourselves in agreement, then you will speak as softly as he.

"I have good connections with Poshan, my home town in Shantung, where my nephews and siblings manage my property. We have often encountered there what our beloved brother Wang has

suffered, and what the inhabitants of Kuangyuan have suffered. Fine things we've encountered, fine things, but the child who stands before you mustn't prattle before men of your experience. See now: how often in the rich southern provinces does the Great River overflow its banks, and how often does the sea with its white breast hurl itself on the land, casting down houses and man and woman and child? How often does the Typhoon beat along the swarming coast, dance over the Yellow Sea and every junk and boat and great sailing ship suddenly grows legs and joins with him in a barbaric, horrible dance? And this little child will say nothing of the wicked demons that blight the fields so that famines break out. But see: people want to imitate the great powers; and whoever is a great lord wants to be a greater. And there are men, born of mothers, who swagger around the Eighteen Provinces, who have power in their hands, and they throw themselves like the grim sea over the flat land, so painfully cultivated, and with their broad bodies trample down the rice and all the fruits. There are gentlemen who swirl like a dark sandstorm over whole towns and populous villages and as they swirl suck up as much sand as people so that no one remembers how to breathe. And worst of all rages the spring tide that long ago fell upon the precious land, the Flower of the Middle, and ripped away its leaves and blooms. This tide came from the north and breaks against our rich fields and towns. It has dumped its slime and coarse grit on our rich fields and peaceable towns, and is called Ta Ch'ing, the Pure Dynasty. And I want to tell you something about it."

Wang had long since pulled himself upright, stared wide-eyed at the old man, placed himself opposite him. The others craned their necks, pushed nearer to the door; the pulse beat harder in their temples; they watched the old man, he had them in the bag.

"I shan't tell you anything about it, because you gentlemen know it all yourselves. When the tiger howls, the wind rushes through the valleys. The Manchus, the hard Tartars, who fell on our weak land straight from the foxhunt in their northern mountains, won't lord it over us until the dawn of eternity. Our race is poor and weak, but

we are many and shall outlive the strongest. You know what the people do, down by the sea when the seven peaceful years are up, the rainy season and the northwest gales are past, the disaster has struck and they're still alive? They build. Build dykes, day and night, ram piles, heap up clay, mix branches and straw in it, plant grass. Such clever men will think me presumptuous when I ask them, in a strange house, what dykes they have built because they fear the spring tide and because they want to sweep the water back from their land. But others have long been quietly gathering clay in their hands, have stolen straw from such and such a one, at moments when no one was watching have secretly planted little grass seedlings and nurtured them. Already invisible walls and dykes crisscross the land, with sluices and outlets that we shall close when the moment comes: the water cannot return to the sea, the land is not drowned; we shall evaporate the water slowly with our fire like the salt panners, and retain the grains. I come from Poshan; our land yields less than on the Great River; but among our cabbages there has long bloomed a flower, secret but well-tended: the White Waterlily."

None of them was sitting now. Excitedly they gasped, "The White Waterlily," gathered around Chu, clapped him joyfully with their hands, flashed dark eyes at him. They were enchanted at the transformation in the halfwitted tomcat. They laughed their multifarious laughs: softly content, a challenging bleat, clear and triumphant as a bugle call; Ma No chuckling but unsure. Their lips were wet, mouths full of saliva. Under their cheeks thin hotplates glowed. Stomachs lurched gently.

"We are here, good sirs, to take counsel. Each of you may contribute as much as he has in his head. Wang has told us of his encounter in Chinan-fu with a certain grave Su-ko. I come from Poshan, not far from Chinan. I didn't wait until a swift friend had cause to avenge me; perhaps I should not have found such a one. At the back of my street stood just such a little whitewashed wall, waiting for me. Already the lifeless hand of the Son of Heaven had drawn the red circle of death around my name. The sentence was

already prepared that was needed to shut my mouth."

The old man was going to rattle on, but Wang interrupted him. He took him firmly by the shoulder, forced him down to the ground beside him. Wang stroked the old man's cheeks and knotty hands, offered hot tea. The old man still gulped, snatched, thrust out his lower jaw, stared straight out of red eyes, had singing ears.

The vagabonds, empty with rage, sobbed their burden away. Arms whirled of their own accord. Hot fury squeezed their throats, lashed a tin sounding-board, snorted snarling, quivering into the air. They saw themselves laid bare to the veins, lung vesicles, Chu had solved their riddle: they were outcasts, victims; they had an enemy and were radiant in their foaming hatred.

At this moment Ma No surrendered to Wang. Ma felt Wang's obscure, sympathetic gaze, sensed how inwardly he was drawing these ravening animals to him, fearlessly soothing and kissing them; and suddenly a thread in him snapped. What now? He was drained of thought. What did it matter? The prior, the Buddhas, Paradise meant nothing! Renunciation of all restraint, smashing of all resistance. Contemptuous scowls at the vagabonds, their needs so petty compared to what Wang was suffering. A shiver. A steely alien certainty, aiming outwards from inside him. Ungiddy free fall into an abyss. Weak feather-light obeisance at Wang's feet.

Wang fussed dumbly, sadly over the old man. He could see them all with knives between their teeth running down the mountain. They were slipping away from him.

He did not speak until they noticed his absent, distracted expression. His face was still wet with tears. He spoke wearily, mumbled into the space before him, often started convulsively: "None of that's any use. There'd be no end to it, were we ten times, a hundred times as many. What are we? Fewer than the friends Chu had then, and Chu sits with us and has to rub his heart bare. A rabble of beggars from the Nank'ou mountains. There'll be killing after killing."

The sly narrator from Kuangyuan shouted him down. His hard, mocking voice now sounded moved, gentle and slightly angry.

Wang and he glared at each other. They were no idle beggars. Anyone who'd gone through what they had was no mere footpad. Yes, they were poor outcast men with barely any fight left, half dead, the kind they give a mouthful of water to and then chase away with kicks so you don't die on the doorstep. Their four brothers were lost, soon it would be their turn. His eyes flashed again.

Wang stretched his legs, made his way carefully through them, embraced Ma No in passing, stood by the wall right at the back almost out of Sight. Only when the dull glow from the hearth flared brighter did they see that he stood with head bowed, his hands behind him touching the statue of a Buddha. Ma No beside him. Wang felt himself tossed on a stormy sea. It was as if, floundering between life and death, his arms had struck a raft suddenly, he dragged his body onto it and spoke to the drowning men, steered the raft to shore with his legs.

"Bad things have been done to us: that is fate. Bad things will be done to us: that is fate. On every road, in the fields, streets, mountains I have heard from the old folk that only one thing helps against fate: not to fight it. A frog can't devour a stork. I believe, dear brothers, and will hold fast to it, that the course of the almighty world is fixed and unyielding and does not turn aside from its path. If you want to struggle, then so be it. You will alter nothing, I shan't be able to help you. And then, dear brothers, I shall leave you, for I must part from those who live in fever, from those who don't come to their senses. An ancient said of them: you can kill them, you can let them live; their fate is decreed from outside. I must submit to my death and I must submit to my life and look on both as trivial, neither hesitating nor hasting. And it would be well for you to do the same. For any other course is hopeless. I shall bear the small and the great, without desire and with no sense of burden, and turn aside to where men do not kill. Yeah, I shall tell you this of Kuan-yin and the other golden Fos that Ma No worships; they are clever and venerable gods, I worship them for what they have said: Thou shalt not kill any living thing. I will make an end of murder and vengeance; that road leads to nowhere. Don't be angry with me that

I am not of your mind. I shall be poor, so that I have nothing to lose. Riches pursue us down the street; they never catch us up. I must climb—with you, if you wish—another peak, more lovely than any I have yet seen, the Summit of Supreme Bliss. Not to act; to be as weak and docile as the white water; to skim like the light from every slender leaf. But what do you have to say to that, dear brothers?"

They were silent. Chu sighed, "You must lead us, Wang. Do as you will."

Wang shook his head. "I shall not lead you. When you're of my mind, then I shall lead you. You must agree, now, this moment. And you shan't hesitate, and those in the village shan't hesitate, for at bottom not one of you speaks any differently. You merely froth so still, like I myself once, dear brothers. Go with me. We are outcasts and proud of it. In our weakness we are stronger than them all. Believe me, none shall dare strike us down; we shall turn aside every point. And I shan't forsake you. Whoever strikes us will know his own weakness. I shall protect you and me; I shall journey to Shantung and seek the protection of the brothers of the White Waterlily, as Chu proposed. But I shall not protect robbers or murderers. Let us be what we are: weak, distressed brothers of a poor people."

Ma No's arms clung around Wang's great neck; he whispered hotly, "And I shall journey with you. I shall be a poor weak brother under your protection." The others sat motionless, looked long at one another. Then they cast themselves, Chu first, then the four, down before Wang with their foreheads to the ground.

Ma No's hut was empty.

Crows and great ravens hopped over the steps through the open door, sat in the hearth that was still warm, tugged with their beaks at the coarse rush matting. Two grey civet cats let themselves down from the roof by their tails, with one bound threw themselves at full stretch into the piled up blankets and skins, burrowed around in them. Their gleaming speckled fur flashed in the evening rays. A fat

raven rocked on the empty shelf and peered down. When the larger of the two cats reared up with his short legs pressed against the wall, he launched himself with nervous wingbeats and harsh caws towards the ceiling, out through the open door.

In the village at this same evening hour the footpads were going one behind the other into the house of peasant Lei, one of those four houses around the oak tree at the entrance to the village. In the back yard stood a spacious empty barn used by the peasants for meetings. The great open doors on the long side let in wide floods of light.

What was discussed at this meeting in the barn, in the heavy stink of rotting straw, stale clothing and cowdung, is briefly stated. Wang was not present; during the long trek down with the golden Buddhas and the sweetly smiling Kuan-yin of rock crystal Ma No had not left his side. They were sitting together in the room full of farm implements and talking.

Ma No was loosed from chains: elated, gawky and droll. The old waspishness sounded disagreeably in his voice; he had to struggle with his grimaces, his manner of speaking, sudden passions which were now groundless and which he dragged around with him like a sick animal its winter coat in the spring. He recognized with the subtlest of feelings his duty to observe Wang; saw with trepidation the dangers that threatened Wang; saw in the background Wang's fear of the vagabonds' worship. Ma No watched with pleasure as a paternal, lordly feeling for the brothers who had put their faith in him sat firmer and firmer on Wang.

In the barn the five delegates reported on their discussion with Wang Lun and what Wang had said to them. Repeated it almost word for word. They stood in the middle of the draughty space; men crowded around them. The effect of the delegates' report was tremendous.

Fresh attacks, arrows in their midst could not have aroused them so. From some, who generally kept their distance from the others, came scornful comments about monkery; they shrank back when they found themselves surrounded by passion-filled faces, quiet staring into space, urgent questioning, thoughtful pacing up and

down.

Those who had returned from Ma No's hut radiated an unshakable certainty; they stood hemmed in; the throng echoed again and again their "Wang is right." These envoys, from old Chu to the gangling, hulking youth who had carried the bloody pelt into Ma No's hut, were stared at, surrounded by their comrades who grasped their hands, thirsted, marvelled at their composure. None of them called Wang, squatting in the room to which all thoughts were turned, a couple of houses away. They had no wish to see him; he ought not to look on all this, the pacing, the doubt, this perplexity. They feared the dousing of all lights at his hand.

To most Wang's plan came as an intoxication to be resisted. What was being conferred on them was a general absolution. They were to wander, each protected by the others, begging, working through the province, never staying long in one place, never sleeping within solid walls, never killing. They were to do harm to no one, not cheat, not be vengeful. Those who wanted could pray to the mildest gods, the gods of Sakyamuni that Ma No and Wang had carried down from the mountains. What this would bring them was vast, so vast it could not possibly be put into words. The eyes of the five speakers grew small with bliss and reticence. The hulking youth in particular had something wooden, clumsy in his manner, spoke brokenly, was tightly constrained in his bearing as if he were suddenly abstracted, ill at ease in his skin. The others asked what their aim would be, not curious or sceptical but greedy, stirred up. Wang Lun's envoys just smiled shyly; it seemed there were secrets at the back of it, powerful ones, so powerful that even they had not yet been initiated into them. The questioners fell silent themselves, uneasy in their hearts and at the same time thrilled.

They had a feeling of return and of loosed chains. Those incapable of self-control, who had fallen victim to their lusts, worn out scorners of the world and cold ironists, were the first to be taken with the plan. They were empty, pushed and lurched their way through changeable, wretched lives, good-natured, volatile in their interests. These were the most prone to infatuation, for they had

nothing to lose or win, were quite defenceless since they had nothing to occupy them. So bold in the most terrifying situations, such unflappable guards and attackers, they were at their most unresisting when a face showed itself hard with resolve and radiated feeling. It ensnared them, they chased after it, they begged, raved in fury, and if it evaded them believed themselves cheated of their property and lost. They were the trustiest vanguard of every, every doctrine. They walked around in the barn, played the fool in their usual way. They could hardly bear to listen as the envoys spoke on, they were so enthralled, tormented by all excess; they were embarrassed by their transformation.

The lucky ones who had fled the pressures of town life pricked up their ears when they heard they were to go back. They were to forgive, they were being urged to remember. These were the ones who went around deeply preoccupied, often listened, looked about with furrowed brows. They were sensitive to jostling: people crowded them. The arid deluge of their experiences and entanglements rose before their eyes; they shrank in horror from them as from a snake's hole. They were to forgive, do harm to no one: that was supposed to clear up the whole muddle. They clung to the envoys, hung on their words, complained inwardly. Feelings of revenge welled up in them, healing, reconciling them to themselves and others. They would go through the old streets, brothers of a secret league, arousing fear, doing no harm. The moment they thought of it they were transported to the place, saw themselves wandering: the role of accuser entranced them. They were to go back: a flush of expectation went through them. They clung to the envoys, hung on their words, yearned.

In the corners stood sulky faces, young and not so young, not speaking to each other, chewing knuckles, picking straws from the ground to stick between their lips. These grim groups were composed of outcasts who moped around among the vagabonds; they had taken up with them only from necessity, and had grown surly among them. They could be shown a public fountain and, thirsty, would not dare approach it, so often had they been driven

off with blows; they would look on calmly with a habitual sourness as the others drank, these outcasts among the outcast. They were not sure if they were included, if they were allowed to be brothers among brothers. Only when the smiling embarrassed comedians began to mix among these fellows, where they felt safest, did their expressions relax. None listening in the barn to those old affectionate creatures, Wang's emissaries, had hearts as defenceless and forlorn as theirs. Scratch them on the heart with a nail and blood would spurt. They were dreadfully timorous. They melted under Wang's words; some of the older ones embraced each other and filled the echoing barn with their sobbing. Timid as maidens they suffered the others to approach them, and even later faced their new brothers with memory-burdened awe. Some of them, beside themselves with what they were now part of, pushed through the crowd, knelt before the envoys, bowed down to the earth, spoke incomprehensibly. They had succumbed to the ecstasy of being admitted as brothers, weak distressed brothers of wicked vagabonds.

The waiting, the misled, the homeless and crippled ate words and faces like sweet cakes. They felt themselves in good hands; they felt that justice was theirs, that their cause was being pleaded with dignity before all the world. These were the ones who had long been most intimate with Wang and who expected most from him; he was, they believed, more their brother than the others'. They dreamed openeyed and exulted inwardly.

None of the four or five human predators who had lodged with them up in the mountains was still in the village. They had slipped off one by one as soon as it grew warmer, loped along snowy paths, dug their caves and huts free and waited, waited.

When late that night the five envoys entered Wang Lun's house and in the warm parlour, the same one in which he had played the trick with the leather bag, began to tell him about the assembly and its outcome, Wang leaned trembling against the table, heard them one by one and asked no questions.

Then he told them what his plan was, and what they must do in the following weeks. He would go alone to Shantung; it would be weeks, perhaps a month, before he saw them again. Hammered into them that they were to scatter, come together only on one day or another, not stay long in any place but always keep in touch with each other. They were at liberty to accept into their community others of their kind who felt drawn to them, but should lay no store on gaining new brothers. Were to pluck no fruit from the trees, but wait until it fell off itself. They must look out only for themselves: this he couldn't stress enough. And then for the rest of the night, before they went to bed, they talked more of the mysterious and the divine.

This time it was not a discussion. After the excitement of the past few days they sat in the low half dark room around the bare wooden table, leaning on their arms, heads drooping wearily to the table, stared before them, breathed. They were silent, then one would speak to himself, unharness his dark thoughts, fall silent. They had heard much on their travels. It kept them awake, reconnoitring this new territory.

One of them told of the great masters Tung-bin and T'ai-pai, who climbed aboard cloud chariots, traversed rainbows and then lost themselves in the skirts of the mist. They reached the summit of the world, leaving no footprints behind in the mud and snow, they cast no shadows. They bestrode peaks and crags until they came to the K'unlun mountains, at the portals of Heaven. They pushed through a fence, saw Heaven a canopy above, Earth a sedan chair below.

Wang himself began to speak mysteriously of the Summit of the World, of the Three Precious Ones. He broke off suddenly, turned his head as if confused, seeking, to the side, to Ma No. Ma No in a cloister-chant: "Sakya is the all-protecting; succeeded by the Maitreya whom the pious await, the pale, calmly majestic king of the precious moon." He droned raptly on about transformations.

Everyone sat with his own thoughts.

When it was bright morning Wang took his leave of Ma No. Without giving any reason, he rejected an offer to accompany him.

In front of Ma in the little bare room Wang made the silent vow, singed the hairs on his crown, held his finger over a flame, threw the last of his money onto the floor.

On the same day that the beggars abandoned the village and scattered to the north Wang set off on his journey to Shantung, to the brothers of the White Waterlily. He walked without stopping, often sixty or seventy li in a day. A terrible blizzard held him fast for two days in the mountains before he emerged into the hill country and the plains.

During his weary journey Spring broke through. The town of Yangchou-fu saw the beggar and paid him no heed; not long afterwards it would see followers of this man suffer horrors within its walls, fall half into ruin. He crossed great rivers, the Imperial Canal, spent one night in Linch'ing, the town in which he was to die. As Spring came on, he neared the rich familiar fieldscape at the westerly foot of T'ai-shan. In the winter fields they were still stripping rushes, uprooting the long sterns for market. He thought of Chinan-fu, not far from here, and Su-ko. When the first rain fell, sowing began: rape, beans, wheat. The bellowing of mighty plough oxen, the near and distant singing of the sowers accompanied Wang. He continued on, south and east, bypassed clamorous Chinan.

His food he earned from begging, coolie work; he helped in the fields. In the larger villages and towns he set up as a storyteller, carried in his hand the clapper, the dice that a great teacher called Ma No had lent him; he listened to the people, sowed his seed with great skill.

He had left Chihli, was again in Shantung, the country that had given birth to great K'ungfu-tzu, restorer of the ancient order, iron central pillar of the edifice of state; the country that for centuries had brought forth secret leagues to topple emperors and fearlessly restore the equilibrium that this edifice required. The land had borne a monstrous corpse, ceaselessly now offered up the living in order

that its flesh, its monstrous bones should fertilize the earth and not burden vast areas of precious soil. The secret societies were the picks, shovels and rakes of the province. They survived reigns, dynasties, wars and revolutions. Supple and insinuating they adapted to every altered circumstance, remained through every twist and turn quite unchangeable, exactly the same. The leagues were the land itself, stretched out with its blind eyes; the people haggled up above, celebrated their feasts, increased themselves, appeased their ancestors, generals came, soldier folk, Imperial princes, battles, conflagrations, victory, defeat; after a time, an untold number of months, little vibrations trembled in the land, volcano eyes cast flaming untender glances, plains subsided; a wide mouthed thundering; disturbed, the land flung itself onto the other side to sleep; everything was well again.

Centuries had passed since the Ming rulers, born of the people, true Chinese, grew weak, turned over, twitched slowly. In the collapse of the Empire, undermined by impotence, criminality and eunuchy, the leagues made their move. They met with coldness the contempt of courtiers, who placed a boy on the throne. Then they openly declared war on him, wrested control of the land; throughout the provinces the waterlily of Shantung gleamed a fearful white. Through the centuries the leagues had not forgotten the happy times of the Ming emperors. Legends twined around their name. The Manchus were no oppressors; they let the people be, as long as they allowed themselves to be ruled. However great the emperors were that the Manchus gave to the Empire, performing and preserving imperishable deeds, to the unbending confederacies they remained always alien; they were forever in the wrong. However mildly and lovingly and oblivious of self these powerful aliens toiled for the people, they could raise no frank smile on the lips of the women whose arms held them in death and in life. The Manchus had to know that these hearts were closed to them. There was no vindictiveness. They held the people down by the sword. Violence began to contend with violence. China, the widow, pining away in hopeless yearning, gathered friends against the earnest consort.

Coolness was met with anger, disappointment was met with anger.

Wang skirted the green hills at the western foot of T'ai-shan. When the first hills were behind him, he laid up for a few days with his old friends from the Chinan time. He sent a sly young potter that he found among them down to Chinan with greetings for the priest T'o, keeper of the temple of the Patron of Music, Han Hsiang-tzu. Then Wang could wait no longer for the messenger's return. The potter did not find the priest in the temple; after Wang murdered the T'ouszu he had left his room and gone into hiding in the town, first in the green mansions, where a girl Wang had befriended took him in, then in a little village across the river, where he began to practise his skill as an engraver of pewterware. Here the astute potter found him. Shock and joy at the news caused T'o to drop his steel stylus. Behind a bolted door he interrogated the young fellow, who told him of Wang's earnest, even awe-inspiring bearing and hinted at his mission in Shantung. Both of them, T'o and the potter, left the village early next morning. When they reached the mountains four days had elapsed since the potter set off and Wang was one day's march farther on, leaving no word of where he was going. Not until much later, in the days of final desperation, did Wang see his teacher once more and realize once more his devotion to him.

The birches and bright hazelwoods in the lovely hill country through which the man from the Nank'ou mountains wandered burst into leaf. Cranes sailed through the air. The wind amended its blustery behaviour; the crags were higher and barer. The coalmining region of Poshan came nearer. Now and then long endless trains of mules passed him, carrying candied dates, sweet red fruit down into the valleys.

Then the roads grew broader; even the mountains drew apart. Dark wide fields stretched out with irregular holes, pits in which excavated coal lay exposed. The air even in sunlight grew thicker and darker. In many places columns of smoke rose into the air like posts marking off the district and fencing it in. The road was hard; round blocks of granite were strewn about. The ground undulated.

On a bare stony plain stood the great town of Poshan.

Wang had obtained from Chu the address of a wealthy pitowner. He did not find the man in his great solid house; he was travelling on business, they said, around the neighbourhood. Wang had to await his return. He went out and hired himself as a labourer in a pit. They stood in fives and tens in the deep shafts with blackened torsoes, heaved on mighty winches. Rhythmically, hand over hand they heaved on the slippery leather strap. Their singing fell away evenly from the top to the depths, and rose like the bucket full of water and coal. They lived in the plain, crowded together in huts of mud.

Every evening Wang walked into the town. He had to make his way between heaps of coal like pointed hats. Then came empty fenced-off patches over which a suffocating acidic smell hung. Here crystallising in the sun in great vats was the ferrous sulphide that they extracted from a lye of pyrites. On the sixth day the pitowner was at home; he had already heard of the strange workman who asked for him day after day.

Ch'en Yao-fen was large and broadshouldered, with a bony forehead; had an energetic nature, spoke in the short urgent sentences of the very busy; his questions were straight to the point. Wang had never come face to face with such a man before. He wavered at the start of their interview; his certainty left him for a moment; dark memories of his days as a trickster in Chinan flitted over him; he felt caught out. It was only when he pronounced Chu's name, when the merchant made a step towards him in amazement and he began his dealings with Ch'en, that everything quietened under a cool watchful calm.

Ch'en stood there an age, his left ringspangled hand at his mouth, not moving, shocked at Chu's fate. Then he bolted the door, invited his guest, not understanding what it was he wanted, to sit at a little table in front of the house altar, offered him tea from his own cup. Wang, whose face and ears bore traces of coal dust, gave an account of his purpose, plain and simple: the straits they had endured in the Nank'ou mountains this winter past, how they had taken over the

little village, how the beggars had formed themselves into a brotherhood and followed him, the actions of the prefect of Chatuo against them. They would perish, craved the protection of patriotic friends, for they like Chu were innocent.

The merchant, whose bulging eyes never left the face of the man who sat there with dangling arms and swollen fists and made his request as if he were asking for a cup of rice, enquired only what form this protection should take. He received the answer: Pressure on the authorities; in an emergency, direct incorporation of the persecuted and support for them. Then with gentle words he requested Wang to leave, so as not to arouse suspicion; in the morning at the lye vats, where he was trying out a new process that he had learned of on his trip, they would be able to continue their conversation in peace. Wang bowed and clasped his hands together, after reminding him of the pressing urgency of his mission.

The merchant gasped once he was alone. He understood nothing of all this, could not understand why Chu, the closest tongued of all of them, who without a word had abandoned all his worldly goods, should have bared everything to these vagabonds, betrayed them all. He tossed about all night. When he dressed next morning he placed a short broad knife in the tobacco pouch at his belt. If it came to it, he would get rid of this emissary in the lye vats. Ch'en was quite prepared to murder; this affair demanded immediate action. In order not to implicate anyone else he did not seek out his friends and guildsmen. He lit incense before the ancestral tablet in his living room, vowed a hundred taels towards the construction of a pagoda should the matter turn out well, summoned his bearers.

His chair bore him as far as the fenced-off fields. Then two by two the bearers lugged great curiously shaped pots filled with a leaden substance along behind him, at his command set them down beside one of the flat lye pans the size of a room. A brown-black liquid covered its surface, exhaled a constricting, caustic vapour. With a gesture Ch'en dismissed the bearers.

Wang came, at a sign from Ch'en squatted next to him by the basin. They wound the thin silk scarves that lay beside Ch'en around

mouths and noses.

How many might they be in the Nank'ou mountains?

A hundred when he came away, now maybe four hundred, maybe a thousand.

Why so vague, maybe four hundred, maybe a thousand? How could they increase their number so quickly?

They were all of the same mind. They had all suffered greatly. They protected one another.

Once more, who was he, where did he come from, what was his part in all this?

His name was Wang Lun, he was the son of a fisherman, born at Hunkang-ts'un in the district of Hailing in Shantung. He was their leader; he had advised them not to do anything against oppression, but to live as outcasts without resisting the world's course.

What did he intend with it, this leading, this advice, what did he intend with it all? Why didn't they just scatter to the eight corners of the Earth, live as he said, just as he said, which really seemed quite a suitable thing, instead of congregating, drawing the attention of the authorities to themselves, demanding protection from unknown brotherhoods and so on.

Those who scattered would be ruined, said Wang. He considered it best for the brothers to hold together; otherwise in no time they would all be murderers, bandits, violators of women, burglars again. It wasn't enough to be a footpad; you had to know which path to set your feet on.

Now for the first time the merchant, sitting there with his mind made up, felt astonishment. He studied the man beside him, who returned calm answers and all the time stared into the brown-black acid brew.

"You've left your lye here for four days, Ch'en. It's not enough just to wash the pyrites that we haul out of the mine. You leave the lye day after day in the sunlight. One sulphur crystal after another grows as the water evaporates. Pour your lye into a brook: it won't grow any crystals then, Ch'en."

Long confabulations on the days that followed, just the two of

them. In the last of these Wang played his trump: that though he might be seeking the protection of the White Waterlily for his brotherhood, he didn't come empty handed. For he brought to the league a steadily growing army, one that could be relied on. When the strings of the yüeh-ch'in are stretched too tight they cease to lament and hum, spring like a New Year firecracker against the player's cheek and the twang leaves a streak of blood.

Late in the evening of the fourth day Ch'en decided reluctantly to invite friends to luncheon on the following day. And after the sixteen had dined for three hours on many rare vegetables, lobster tails, pastries, chicken heads, mutton dumplings, braised noodles, after the sweet cakes, the wines, liqueurs and the vinegar had been cleared from the little tables, Ch'en had to tell his friends as they smoked about this strange beggar from the Nank'ou mountains.

He related it first as an anecdote, an amusing incident, then, when the guests wanted to turn to other things, he held fast to it, and suddenly the tone of their conversation altered in a quite imperceptible manner and the gurgling of waterpipes ceased. Everything happened as Ch'en had feared. There was laughter, indignation, displeasure over his role; many of them, the cleverer, were thunderstruck and fearful.

They sat around the small, closepacked tables in the sumptuously furnished room. Bright carpets and bamboo mats warmed the floor. Dark-stained pillars of wood, two rows of them, supported an elegantly panelled ceiling from which embossed iron lamps and lanterns hung at the feet of gryphons, out of dragons' mouths. Speckled orchids lay at each place. A gorgeous wall screen had been pulled across to conceal the Eight Immortals table by the rear wall in front of the household altar. A gigantic yardhigh decorative mirror was turned face to the wall and revealed on its shining black wood herons gliding over waves, perched on rocks on the shore, flying very small in the firmament into the sun's rays.

Ch'en Yao-fen sat in a simple black silk gown among his colourfully-garbed guests. They nibbled sweetmeats, sipped from tiny teacups, cracked nuts. They basked in the mellowness and ease

of the hour, waited for the actresses that Ch'en usually hired from the town, and were not at all inclined to turn their minds to beggars from the faraway mountains of Nank'ou. Then when Chu's name dropped, and it seemed that Chu had spoken about them in the Nank'ou mountains, there was a general agitation, jumping up, crowding around Ch'en. The chinking of little sweet dishes ceased. They flocked together by the wallscreen in front of Chen's household altar.

Pailien-chiao, the White Waterlily, was in session.

The curses against Chu grew loud. They wanted to know more, more, more. What then, how then, why then? Ch'en's explanations repeated themselves. The adherents of the Waterlily in Chihli should be informed, alerted to these developments, prevailed on to use their influence so that nothing should happen to this new beggars' league, if the worst came to the worst to take the beggars in and hide them.

The fierce opposition of the others stung Ch'en, who had spoken not quite confidently, to speak with greater force and not without sharpness. They broke up at the request of many whose dismay was extreme, agreed to meet again in the evening.

It was fear that dominated most of these sixteen men. Their cause was suddenly to acquire a face. Suddenly: that was the essential problem; needlessly, for no reason. Ch'ien-lung had ruled for a long time. The Emperor had a hard, not unjust hand. It was dangerous, futile, to instigate a rising against him. It was not the time.

That evening the bright embossed lanterns and lamps flickered from the panelled ceiling. The accusations levelled by some against Ch'en were fiercer than at midday. That he had fallen for this errand boy instead of giving a swift man five strings of cash and a little sharp knife. One of them moaned, wept, gave himself and his family for lost.

In the darkness Wang knocked with a prearranged signal on the back door of the house. From behind the wallscreen beside the altar the tall ragged man appeared, stood among the merchants. He related almost word for word what Ch'en had told them. As they crowded around him he described how they had had to descend from

the mountain, the poor, sick men who dwelt with him on the bare slopes of Nank'ou. He spoke as if it had nothing to do with him. The thought came to some of these proud merchants: Give the half-starved fellow a good meal and send him back home with a few taels. They calmed down under his gaze, which they savoured. He really didn't seem alarming; they smiled slightly and nodded to each other. It might be that he and the others were having a hard time; the poor devils shouldn't perish, certainly not. But why all the fuss? Emperor and censors didn't trouble themselves over a few hundred starving men; when the Huang-ho overflowed twenty thousand drowned in an hour and the Empire didn't tremble; the Emperor merely passed a questioning hand over his brow. It was wrong of Chu to have presented the White Waterlily as a charitable institution. Who could tell what hunger and degenerate society had made of him.

The excitement subsided, the headshaking became general. They conversed among themselves while Wang answered questions from this one and that. It was laughable, this proposition that gangs of brawny men should join together with them, when they had no idea what to do with them. They couldn't let themselves be dragged by a hundred or a thousand men into actions of which they could not approve.

Wang sweated, wiped himself in the peasant way with the back of his hand over nose and forehead, mingled with the exquisite perfumes the offensive odour of the high road. He understood the situation exactly. In Ch'en, who was used to command, anger welled up against his brothers, who in some incomprehensible manner had turned away as if there were no danger here for them; they chatted and strolled about as if they were leaving this man and his business to him. Wang and Ch'en exchanged glances.

Suddenly the great ragged man laughed as he cast his eyes over the delicacies on the five little round tables in the room. His mouth widened craftily, his yellow teeth showed. Grinning he turned his head from side to side as with courteous bows he parted the gossiping gentlemen, passing his hand across a full dish of porcelain

as one strokes a baby's naked head. He squatted on a wicker footstool beside the table, and smacking wetly finished off the dish. The guests behind him cooed, tittered, whispered, placed themselves in little groups around him, offered him a dish from another table, which he accepted with thanks. He declared how fine and choice these sweetmeats tasted, selected from the dish morsels pointed out by the guests, and ate. Ch'en remained standing by the screen; the glances of the smiling gentlemen crossed his; they winked at each other; it had become entertaining.

Then Wang uncurled his legs, walked around the little table and insisted that the fine gentleman who had been most friendly in offering him delicacies—he was the youngest, the one who was happiest at this latest turn of events—should sit down on his plaited straw stool. The amused man let himself be led around the table, but turned in front of the stool, remained standing, his expression darkening, his head on one side and his back to Wang. Wang leapt in front of him bowing ceaselessly, pointed with unaltered smile to the laden table, praised the delicacies. When the man coldly took a couple of steps past him, Wang followed with delighted nods, offered his arm as a support and his shoulders, in order to take him to his place at the table with the quite unsurpassable sweetmeats. The man wordlessly brushed Wang's elbow aside. Then the bony beggar from the Nank'ou mountains grasped him from behind, bore him heedless of his childlike screaming and stamping back to the stool, set him on it with a crash, pressed down on his struggling shoulders. He held his left arm around the man's throat. He turned his face in cold fury to all sides, threatening in fisher-brogue, in his right hand held the narrow, finely engraved dagger that the man wore at his belt, waved it in a circle around him. Again and again he bade the young man eat, until pressed by the half smothered urgings of the others he at last took a sweet and swallowed it. Wang withdrew his arm from the man's throat, stretched and yawned. Onto the painted shoes of a stout elderly man who stood all alone and paralysed in the middle of the room he spat the half chewed remains of a date. In the deathly silence he greeted the host, the tall,

grave Ch'en Yao-fen in his black silk gown, bowed grinning, promised to seek again in the morning the honour of a welcome, slipped behind the screen and was out of the door. The assaulted man's dagger clattered, thrown against the ebony rim of the screen.

Ch'en alone had grasped everything during the course of this game; but others too, insofar as they did not stand there mindless with shock, realized that here was something new, that mere words could not cover over. There was a crash, a heavy thud in the room: the young man had fallen senseless from the stool on which he had remained squatting; the overturned stool lay half under his legs. They ran to him, attended to the unconscious man, who suddenly vomited, soon moved his arms, sat upright and blinked dull eyes. There was no loud conversation. These rich gentlemen, as if there were no servants in the house, carefully restored everything in the room to order, wiped up the vomit with silken shawls. They paced up and down.

Ch'en Yao-fen, in a clear vibrant voice, said that it would give him pleasure if the esteemed gentlemen would set foot again tomorrow or in the next few days across his shabby threshold; for today, he would invite them only to partake of a little more sustenance. One after the other they declined; they parted reluctantly, straggled distractedly to their sedan chairs.

Wang made no mention of the proceedings at Ch'en's house when he met the merchant next day at the sulphur fields. He was at pains to make sure there could be no misunderstanding: the brothers from the Nank'ou mountains did not seek protection, but recognition and brotherhood. They were strong in themselves, but they might become dangerous; and this should be prevented. While additives were poured into the lye pans Ch'en penetrated deeper into Wang's conception; his view of poverty, his belief in the golden Buddhas became clearer to him. Covering his face with a shawl against the blue vapour he reflected on the Tao, the rigid, unbending course of the world, which was the beginning and end of Wang's not quite clear notions. They were fanatics, who would soon suffer terribly from want, from the authorities, the proud followers of K'ungfu-tzu.

In Wang's conversations the homely old Tao sounded so joyous.

When they stood up after hours of silent squatting and fidgetting and Ch'en clasped his hands together, Wang knew that he had won the White Waterlily over.

Book Two

The Broken Melon

Through western Chihli the name Wu-wei blew softly as a moth: whirring, fading between valleys.

A twinge went through western and southern Chihli, a rheumatic discomfort in the arm, in the shoulder, over the feet, painful stabbing in a tooth, throbbing nerve above the left eye.

Western and southern Chihli felt this spring the warm disquieting effluvium around the Nank'ou beggars.

The hundred who pulled out of the hamlet of Pat'a-ling grew within a few weeks to several thousand. What they brought to tramps, sneak thieves, victims was nothing less than an avowal of misery. There had been a change since the mountains of Nank'ou:

Wang Lun, the tall, dangerous fellow from Hunkang-ts'un in Shantung, has told amazing things of the golden Fos; he'll help us, he knows magic, we're going along with him. Now the crowd preached for itself. Dwellers in remote villages, pilgrims away down in the plains heard of the multitude who left Pat'a-ling after the great frost and pushed southwards begging, working, praying. At first people declared it was those vagabonds and ruffians who'd been infesting the passes to Wut'ai-shan; such talk evaporated quickly. Wang Lun, they said, had ridden off to the K'unlun on a blue horse, to inform the Queen of the Western Paradise of the founding of their league. He had gone to Shantung to fetch the goldwater and pearls of eternal life. This opinion was the most tenacious. People formed a curious picture of him from the tales of the older men. He was seen as a mild man, endowed with an

enormous physical strength that he didn't know what to do with. From time to time he was seized by strong demons, which he had learned to control by means of a dreadful charm. He had a good heart for the poor p'ing-min; they would all partake of his fabulous gifts.

Wang Lun had left his shadow behind, and it shrouded the league. Quite without design a few men were pushed to the forefront, and the crowd followed them. To be sure some here or there tried to impose themselves, but this was by the way. Everyone accepted his own role.

Through his skill at horsemanship and archery and his fine figure Ngo, a native of Taku in Chihli, though only thirty had attained the rank of You-ch'i in one of the senior Banner regiments. He wore proudly but without ostentation the moonstone in his cap, the tigercat on his breast; when at chess he raised his soft right hand and the mother-of-pearl ring on his thumb glinted dully his opponents had no idea what strong soul sat across from them. For years he had kept up a friendship with an effeminate rouged actor lad, a young fop as people called him. The Emperor thought highly of Ngo; but Ch'ien-lung always displayed a preference for refined, elegant men who did not talk back, knew how to shoot and go through their paces, were hard and unyielding.

The intrepidity he demonstrated during an incident that was much spoken of at the time gained Ngo entry to the innermost circle of courtiers in the Vermilion City of Peking. He was stationed with his detachment opposite the northern gate, where the Gate of Wu-ti leads to the broad moat surrounding the Imperial city. Hard by this part of the wall, so that Ngo and his men could peer across from their watchtowers, lay the palaces of the Imperial wives and concubines. One autumn, at a season when the waters of the moat are covered with small frogs and flies, rumours spread that the little child of a concubine had died of a cramp, and another child, a baby, was lying ill. Doctors and priests strove to exorcize the fever demon from the baby, which cried a great deal but did not betray the name of the demon.

Ngo's guard were alarmed one night by the loud shrieks of several women. Rushing into the gardens up to the concubine's pavilion Ngo heard that the sick child's demon had just been seen inside in the shape of a little bat that lunged at the mother's hair and then fluttered over the baby's hot face and flew out of the door. Ngo recognized from the description-the size of the creature, the white belly, the direction of its flight-that this was a shade he himself had often noticed near the moat in the company of a dragonfly and two brown toads. At nightfall next evening he posted six stout men of his troop at the Gate of Wu-ti, armed with shields, bows and arrows. He himself took up position with sword drawn at the entrance to the threatened pavilion.

At the end of the first night watch the men saw something whirr up out of the water. They shot arrows; the women, made nervous by the noise, released firebrand after firebrand to frighten off the ghost; the rockets streamed green and white through the dark gardens. The demon, which was only dazzled, pressed through, flew around the cypresses. Ngo saw it by the light of a firebrand fluttering about as if dazed. He struck out at it; there was a croaking and screeching. The creature turned, flew back. Ngo pursued it roaring, brandishing his sword. They came to the house of the Director of Imperial Music, a eunuch; all at once the creature disappeared behind the wall of the house. As the women came running up and the light from swaying lanterns grew brighter the official awoke, came in his nightgown astonished to his door, asked what the matter was. Ngo cried, "The grey batdemon has flown over your wall." Horrified the ponderous eunuch ran with Ngo and others into the house. After they had shone their lights in every corner the Director of Music struck himself on the forehead, whispered that they should quickly look beside the hearth in the living room.

And there sat a little female with green eyes, blood dripping from her breast, with the face of an ape. She was grey and said she didn't know how old she was. She was questioned more closely, her hands gripped tight. Tu-hsi, the renowned exorcist of the Vermilion City, who had been waiting all night by the endangered pavilion and had

rushed into the house with the others, signed a warning to the people holding the grey witch, but it was too late. She transformed herself into a black cat, scratched their hands and arms. Tu-hsi threw himself on her. In the very moment that he fell upon her he changed himself with one glance in his octagonal hand mirror into a white tiger that tore at the cat. They scratched and bit bloodily on the floor amid the howling of the women; then Ngo struck off the witch's head.

He stood there laughing, rejoiced bloodthirstily over the little red puddle on the floor, while the others ran back along the dark paths to wash and free themselves from the glance of the dead demon.

The concubine's child was saved. Ngo received a little bag of peppermint as a gift from the Emperor.

His new duties in the inner court quickly estranged Ngo from his weapons. He had to immerse himself in the intrigues, the gossip mongering, the eunuch atmosphere. There was already a certain playful, passionate tendency in him, to which he now gave full rein. He fell in love with the fourteen year old son of a poor gardener's widow, called Ching-tsung, fitted him out with everything necessary, took him into his lodgings, addressed many fine poems to him. The rooms of this former soldier were strewn with rouge pots, perfume bottles, embroidered shawls. The vain youth, who had a feminine nature and was not without a certain grace, lay in the lap of the demon conqueror and smiling let himself be kissed by meek lips, and fed sweets.

They loved each other until the youth, strutting like a prince in silken gowns, accused Ngo of paying more attention to another boy than to him, and ran away. For days Ngo wept distracted in his rooms. The gardener's widow brought the boy back; he'd been playing her up horribly. Ngo forgave him, even after he confessed that a eunuch was interested in him and he'd already accepted presents from him. Little by little Ngo found out details of this friendship, found out who was involved, and was so grieved and disgusted that he began once again to request a posting to guard duty on the walls. He was not at all cross with him, but still the boy

noticed a change in his friend's manner.

And perhaps because his long association with Ngo had refined him, made him more sensitive, he became visibly quieter, fell into a melancholy, for weeks ate almost nothing, lay in a constant abstraction. The captain sat gnawed with pain beside his beloved's couch, throughout the long weeks of his illness kept to the house. At last the boy recovered. Their friendship glowed, they were devoted to each other as never before. Although human foibles were usually overlooked in these exotic circles, everyone laughed at bold grave Ngo's infatuation. Ching-tsung was a great pampered lad; the captain treated him as if he needed guarding against every draught, started nervously at every hard look from the boy.

It was not the captain, too deeply immersed in his own feelings, who noticed the turned up noses around them. The boy, still irritable after his illness, berated Ngo angrily for making him a laughing stock, determined to leave him, let himself to be commandeered by another captain who spoke mockingly of Ngo with him. Ngo wandered mindlessly on the walls of the Tartar City, in the palace fell into a long swoon, raged; friends held the homicidal man back. They calmed him with difficulty, his eyes not yet opened to the sentimentality of his behaviour.

Once he had fought down his desperation he considered what was left for him. Army and uniform were hateful to him; he could not remain in the Vermilion City. He secured a transfer to the Office of River Traffic at Hsuanhua on the Yang-ho. There he passed his time in strenuous activity, riding, sailing, writing verses, at his own request was retained for a further three years, received a promotion, during his period in office increased the traffic and the state revenues not inconsiderably.

At the end of his posting in Hsuanhua he took a little trip to visit an uncle in Tat'ung; failed to return. After half a year's search he had to be struck off the official rolls. It was assumed he had fallen victim to the bandits on Nank'ou. But Ngo had gone to the Truly Powerless, just at the time when they were pulling out of the village and Wang left them.

The strange band that wended around the cliff called Shen-yi on its way east to the famous pass of Nank'ou experienced their first moment of fear and astonishment when the solitary elegant man on his mule trotted along behind and struck up a conversation with two of them. They trailed through the long narrow valley; the rider followed. Ngo followed unsure of himself; it was really just the sight of a young lad he had glimpsed in the middle of this ragged, burdened vagabond train that held and unsettled him. He did not know that this boy bore a resemblance to his faithless friend in the Vermilion City. The men talked a lot. It seemed they were sectarians, who would cause problems for the authorities. At midday he halted, amused at himself but somehow happy, full of hope, among these fellows who treated him as one of their own.

It was a bizarre company he now found himself in; he was calmed; in some unfathomable way he belonged. His visit to Tat'ung was no pressing matter; you have to catch fish when they come your way; and the weather was glorious, heavy with snow, as when a child leans over a precipice, his silken cloak, thin scarves are blown baggy by the wind, up over his head, you see only billowing streamers, cloths, bright swellings, think you see among them merry waggish eyes, clapping hands, and now and then the smell of real ginger wafts down to a twitching nose.

Ngo in his mandarin's hat, thick brown furs, furtrimmed shoes crouched on the ground beside a tea kettle, his mule beside him. A single cup made the rounds of the six men; Ngo drank with vivid pleasure. Before it grew dark and they lit little fires in caves, he said in a low voice that he'd like to stay with them.

The next day he was faced with the necessity of deciding. Ma No explained carefully to him that they'd eaten up all the presents from the village; everyone had to fend for himself and some of the frailer ones; perhaps he'd sell his furs in the next village and exchange them for rice and beans, if he wanted to stay with them. As he said this, the priest wondered how the distinguished man with bold eyes sitting there on his mule would look when he walked like them in thick padded rags and held out a begging bowl.

Ngo did not say no; he asked for a day to think it over. He requested only a day because he had a feeling that he wouldn't be able to bear any lengthier reflecting on his situation; he wanted to break through this wall. He withdrew gloomily into himself. All Mencius' erudition was of no avail; he knew the poems of the *Shih-ching* by heart, with their commentaries. They hadn't saved him from the betrayal and scorn of a slender-limbed boy with large eyes.

It broke out roaring in him like a tiger, ran down the road before him; he would have struck it down in numb fury if only he had his sword in his hand. It sprang on him like a tiger that he throttled with splayed fingers, held in his hands a corpse for half an hour and flung aside. A large-eyed boy with rouged cheeks: Ching-tsung. He wrestled with him, lay breathless on the frosty earth. They let him lie there.

He ground his teeth, jaws clamped tight so that he felt the play of the muscles in his cheeks, stared closely at two green sharpedged stones that looked like uncut jade.

But it wasn't likely that uncut jade would lie here on the road; perhaps someone had lost it.

But it was uncut jade; no one here had anything to do with uncut jade.

Ngo felt carefully past his mouth first towards one and then to the other, felt them over in his closed hand, wanted to keep them in any case, have them cut in Hsuanhua, where there were skilled lapidaries.

If they proved suitable, he'd have them worked into a sash in a manner he'd thought of some years before, between green and lilac embroidery.

Yes, that was how he'd use these remarkable stones.

The last two men of the train turned a bend in the winding road, even with the best of wills were no longer to be seen. They might be going straight ahead, then right and left, right and left.

Ngo searched.

They might be going right and left.

This snowladen air, this misty grey on the bare slopes, wagonhigh

above the stones they walked on, this pale ghostly mass that did not want to be poured away and cleansed. You could shovel it up in your arms, press it to your ears.

Suddenly there came to him: *Lotus flower lamps, lotus flower lamps, today you glow so strong, tomorrow your glow's gone*. The nursery rhyme glimmered steadily in him, enabled him to unclench his left arm, crook his knee, put his left leg forward, to walk. And now he too was around the bend in the road, ran as fast as he could after column.

He attached himself to four men, one of whom, a hunchback with a very clever, thin face, bulging eyes, read from a sutra, slowly, as well as his short breath allowed. Ngo listened to the foolish twaddle. The four men attended with knitted brows, compressed lips. The stranger didn't join in. He rolled two green sharpedged stones in his hands, held them up to the hunchback with the sutras, asked if he thought they were jadestones. The hunchback looked at him, then the four gravely tested the stones, rubbed them together, licked them with their tonguetips. One after another they shook their heads. The hunchback gave the stones back with expressions of regret.

"I wanted," said Ngo, marching reflectively along with them, "to make myself a sash with green and blue embroidery. The stones were to be incorporated in a way I worked out years ago. But if you think these aren't genuine jade, I shan't have a sash made after all."

The hunchback raised his page of sutras, with a piece of charcoal struck out a square in the prayer pyramid. "Let us once again read the Sutra of the Lesser Traverse."

Ngo let the day run out to the last drop of the waterclock.

It was a lovely, enveloping evening. He vowed poverty, peace, acquiescence. Asked for no probationary period, whispered that he had joined them; at the same time made a cool dismissive gesture, an encoffining, smoothing gesture.

The wiry man stood next day at the same sunset hour thirty li from the rock chamber where Ma No taken the sabletrimmed mandarin's hat from him, removed his long, expensive fur coat. He looked as wretched as the others. The men squatted on the soft,

grassy forest floor; they spooned millet and dogrice from kettles, dipped it in bowls of vinegar.

In two or three days they would reach the plain; there they would have to separate by day, beg. Towns were coming, Peking was coming.

Ngo heard the metallic clack of bowls, pots, chopsticks. With a hard expression he closed his eyes. He gasped painfully for air, sat bolt upright.

The most notable change during the next few weeks arose from the influx of women and girls that began soon after they reached the plain. Wang Lun had said that nothing human should be turned away; if women came they should dwell apart, make camp separately; any yielding to the appetites was a plunge into the fever of existence; if it happened often it would be best to turn the women away. This was clear, and they kept to it. No one was forced to remain with the Truly Powerless; whoever felt that his wanderings over this Earth were unbearable without brief glowing moments of sweetness could turn back.

Across the Liuli-ho a decent, rather restless fellow called Liu, of a talkative, good-natured disposition, rejoined them after an absence of two days accompanied by an older woman. They were spending a few days in this gently undulating district, gathered at evening in the abandoned cowsheds of a rich livestock farmer not far from a dilapidated pagoda. News of the woman soon spread; that Liu had brought her made them all smile. No doubt she'd persuaded him to marry her.

It was the childless widow of a teahouse owner who appeared at the cowshed door with her black trousers, dirty smock and broad careworn face, made bows to all sides, looked about ingratiatingly. She had been lonely. When Liu, uninvited, helped her with the hard work, drawing water and carrying buckets, she thought he was making fun of her, then felt flattered, listened to his stilted talk of Wang Lun, of the Nank'ou mountains, that they wouldn't go into

monasteries but would live everywhere on the roads, in the fields. And what a magician Wang Lun was; they had so much, so much to look forward to.

The widow saw young Liu, bemoaned her fate. Liu helped, spoke of this and that. She gave him her room for the night, told him she had another; sat all night in her husband's field in a shed, wondered if she should try to make him marry her.

Seductive arts that she practised next morning on entering her room floundered. Liu noticed nothing; she felt foolish.

Then they both became loquacious: she asked all about the men at the pagoda, Liu answered, she asked, repeated, Liu repeated.

When the restless youth was about to leave that evening with a little bag of rice in his arms, she took up another bag of rice, said she'd come too. At which Liu showed no surprise, but declared that that would be nice; he'd be able to tell her more about Ngo and Chu; Ngo to tell the truth was a remarkable fellow, and he'd soon be leader of their band along with Ma No.

The widow was happy. The men all accepted her with kindly unconcern; Liu, who paid no attention to the woman, won general praise, which pleased him greatly. Before long the woman had taken under her wing two invalids with frostbitten feet, knocked together a cart for them after begging all the parts.

Four days later she went over to the village, helped a joiner all day with the sawing for a few cash, told acquaintances about her new life, came back with her pretty fifteen year old niece and a fat asthmatic woman, the wife of a smith. They too stayed with the Truly Powerless.

The smith's wife was childless, the second wife had set herself up as the complete mistress of the household. The proper wife feared for her life. She said the second wife had sent a werewolf to her bed one night; that was how her breathing problem started. She didn't feel at all easy in that miserable hovel, a single room like a cowstall behind the smithy. She was convinced the second wife's child was the offspring not of the smith, but of some loathsome being whose exact nature she wasn't yet quite clear about. The widow's fifteen

year old niece was very friendly with the young second wife. When the widow came, told about the brothers and the smith's wife heard with excitement what powerful magic these men could do, they arranged to go off and swore to each other that they'd stay together; the wife wanted to leave this house with its evil influences, come back later when she'd learnt powerful spells from the brothers. The fat woman stood up quite determined to gain revenge in this way. But when they met at evening behind the smithy, she declared that her friend's niece would have to come too; she often sat for ages with the second wife, but there was a great rat scuttling about under the floorboards in the parlour, and you never could tell what might come to pass in that house between a greedy rat and a simple girl.

So the widow, alarmed, without a moment's hesitation dragged her struggling niece out of the village and the three of them made their way to the pagoda. It was already quiet in the sheds; they lay down in a corner on bedding that the young girl had been made to carry under both arms. In the early morning the smith's wife, groaning and crumpled, gathered her bones; the niece hopped around behind her like a little chicken as she grimly asked this man and that who was the strongest of them and what should she do. A doddering man who was poking in the sandy floor with a stick to make a hole for his kettle returned her a most circumstantial account without once looking at her. She was greatly attracted by the composure of this man, finding him in all respects agreeable. He said that before long there'd likely be an end to werewolves, nightmares, as soon as lots of people marched bravely out against them. The Truly Powerless though turned their faces to quite other things; she'd see soon enough, nothing was of any account to the brothers; werewolves definitely were of no account. Wang Lun, for example. He stepped on her foot and asked her to get out of the way, he needed room.

The woman listened, highly satisfied. She was particularly taken with the fact that clearly everyone, man or woman, could perform all that was necessary without resort to the expensive services of a Wu.

The niece chirped stifflegged with hypocritical little eyes behind the smith's wife, suggested when they should run away. If only they didn't have a good thrashing waiting for them at home. What if they were kicked out or sold. Chu saw her as he passed by with her tearful eyes, kerchief pressed to a quivering mouth. He laughed at this tousled unruly companion. She confided in him, to draw him out. He told her no one would come to take her away. She went off cheerfully with the three men he passed her to.

The league took in great numbers of women: nuns, pilgrims, beggars, victims of every sort. At about the time that Wang Lun was skirting the westerly foot of T'ai-shan, rushes being stripped from the winter fields and the first rain falling, the river of the Truly Powerless rolled in several beds across the plain of western and southern Chihli.

But acceptance of women and the splitting of the band were not so momentous for the fate of the Truly Powerless as the change that came over Ma No. This erstwhile Fo-priest from the isle of P'ut'oshan, eccentric and friend of crows on Nank'ou, carried himself here with a lordly passionate demeanour, under the seething and pawing of his unleashed pride buried himself and a great swarm of Truly Powerless in the plain of northern Chihli.

In Pat'a-ling, Ma No had been fascinated only by what was taking place in Wang. A feeling of motherly anxiety, reverence, delight filled the skinny little man. When Wang sighed that morning and set off alone, Ma No was left in utter helplessness. He sat in the bare storeroom, looked at his swollen finger joints, the Buddhas he had carried in from his cart, the armhigh crystal Kuan-yin of a thousand limbs that stood on the window sill. Rogues, thieves and murderers were his companions; they must wander, wander. Perhaps they'd see a civet cat now and then, like the old fat one that every evening used to thrust its padded snout against his door and chirp like a starling; it was probably snuffling around in his hut this very moment, or some rogue had made himself at home there and was

flinging stones at the startled beast. Crows you could find everywhere; there'd be other crows to see. What was he supposed to do among these footpads? Wang had gone away. They were supposed to wander, not resist, truly: not resist. The word meant nothing without Wang. Wang's teaching rang hollow: "What use is it to rage and struggle, when fate takes its course? What use is it to strive, when fate can only choke on joy, success, sickness, overindulgence?" Strange baggage for beggars!

Mistrustful, withdrawn, he went with the others. He spoke little that day. In his dreams he recalled the previous night, and he nursed a wicked desire for Wang's deep, hard voice. At first he pushed the little cart with its covered Buddhas by himself, snappishly spurned any help. After a few li when the path led upwards, his scrawny arms grew numb, he had to yield the push-bar. Tiredness aggravated the impatience that plucked quite faintly, tormentingly fast on his muscles as on a tiny guitar. He sat down on a round block of granite in the middle of the path.

The procession jammed up. Ma No, his gaze all the while fixed vacantly on the snowy ground, realized after some time that everyone had stopped. He wanted to jump up in irritation, snarl at the man by his cart, was disarmed by the earnest expectant faces, looked about him. Hastily he blurted, "Onward." Turned up his nose, abashed. It was ridiculous: these people waited for his orders, artful rogues waited for a nod from a Fo-priest before moving off. How the great prior on P'ut'o would laugh! He, leader of a gang, robber chief.

Only now did it occur to him that he had taken Wang's place. But he didn't want to, he needed Wang himself. At once this "don't want", this yearning for Wang, violently seized his bowels, squeezed his gorge upwards, milked his spittle. Desperately he pressed his arms to his breast. He saw himself irretrievably lost. His brain swam, his skin burned with the realization that suddenly Wang had gone and everything was meaningless: the joyous surrender to him, the descent into the village, the migration of the horde from the pass. It all punctured his breast, emptied it, impaled his spine.

He had taken Wang's place. The sudden ludicrous thought jolted into him.

In the limp nausea on his tongue he tasted his former life. Wang might slip away from him; what was he to do? He was afraid; he whimpered.

Think! Just think! Where was Wang Lun? The rogues and beggars around him debated. Ma heard the holy precepts that Wang had drawn out of him. Over these simple men lay the intoxication of the past day and night. He looked at them, swallowed up in his gloom; he laboured his way out, fearful of falling back. He forced into view that gentle moment when he gazed into the snowladen sky and for the first time loved Wang. He wanted to experience it again; this experience alone had wings.

He drew closer to the beggars, saw himself again with a slight horror in the role of eavesdropper, clinging, relying. How was he to find Wang? They marched, they didn't feel abandoned by the fisherman's son. Ma mixed with them shamelessly. He flattered them, dissembled so the rogues wouldn't notice anything. And all at once he breathed more calmly, all at once their joyful certainty patched the holes in his soul. He pulled his black cats kin cap over his ears.

The precarious feeling that the men he was supposed to be leading possessed more of Wang than he did himself never left him in the following weeks. Sometimes they couldn't prevail on him to make announcements; he was plunged into a teeth-grinding rage; it seemed they wanted to lead him into temptation. They were reproaching him for being who he was. And again he had to master himself and to his astonishment accept that the brothers thought nothing, trusted him. In fact had a ridiculous reverence for him that differed little from their feelings for Wang. His replies to them were painfully constrained. However blasphemous it might seem, they clearly wanted nothing to come between them and him; no Wang Lun came between the beggars and him. They offered themselves freely, importunately, as chattels. It seemed to him an indecency, a desecration of Wang, that he should be their teacher. He moved

among them with a forced awkward lewdness.

He got used to it. Daily contact smoothed down oversharp sensitivities. Impelled hourly to speak, to decide, he quickly developed a nearness to the brothers that they needed, a leader's nearness. He acted. This, more than thinking, freed and untied. He swam over obstacles. He felt sated, raised above doubt. The Nank'ou times began to dim. He was cast in the hard mould of his new tasks.

Wang's teachings gushed cold. Many a character over whom they had first been sprayed could only rebel vehemently against them. In the poorer regions the unhandy, all skills unlearnt in the course of their trade on Nank'ou, couldn't beg even the most trifling of necessities, were beaten, locked up for days: they made their way laboriously, suspiciously back, could hardly be persuaded to go among men. Their sidelong looks said they would soon go to the work they knew best. Ma No took them under his wing. It couldn't be in Wang Lun's plans to keep your arms folded, unpitying allow ruination. Others must be watched sharply: this one wandered merrily about, set off sprightly in the morning, reported back in the evening in high spirits, too high spirits; he'd found a clansman somewhere nearby, enjoyed his hospitality in peace. The work grew hugely as the current swelled and it was scarcely possible to keep track of who came: name, fate, whether the newcomer offended against the three precious rules of poverty, chastity, serenity, what he expected from the league of the Truly Powerless. Then escaped criminals found their way unimpeded into the league to conceal themselves; they had to be kept at arm's length or accepted, each according to his kind, hidden or chased off. In the one case revenge could be expected, in the other investigation by the local police, prefectural officials. Occasionally the police summarily seized a few men and women on suspicion of harbouring criminals.

There grew a "Circle of Piety", as it was called by the brothers. This curious idea arose spontaneously among them. They believed that in the closed circle of the Truly Powerless the force of contemplation would gradually enable them to reach that Ultimate that was sometimes called the Western Paradise on K'unlun,

sometimes the fifth Maitreya, sometimes the Chin-tan powder that bestows eternal life.

Ma No was dragged roughly out of himself. He grew into his task. Memories of the Nank'ou Pass became harder to evoke. Nank'ou was the birthplace of the league; it was only weeks since the fisherman's son from Shantung had spoken of the old Wu-wei. Ma walked taller in his long patchwork priest's robe. His little sharp features like the face of a crow. There was uncanny animation in the twitching of his low receding forehead, the thoughts chasing about the thin lines of his mouth. When he gesticulated with his skinny hands, his look weaved ropes that held fast. He spoke as rapidly as before, but with greater penetration and control. Such was the vessel on which a multitude embarked for the Great Traverse.

With a group of two hundred men and women Ma No broke off from another which wandered northwards. They were not far from Chengting, a middling town on the Hut'o-ho, whose course they had followed from where it emerged out of the Wut'ai Mountains. Ma No wanted as quickly as possible to reach the lonely region of Talu Swamp, south of Chao. For reasons he did not grasp, he was driven towards a tranquil landscape. Near Chengting a number of men and women came to join Ma's group.

The young Lady Liang-li, who came tripping supported by two maidservants, the loveliest lady of the town, was one of the famous Ts'ai family to which belonged, among others, the great Censor Ts'ai Jen-lung, who served during the time of the Ming Emperor Hsi-tsung. While still unmarried, Lady Liang was greatly attached to her father, who had graced high office and now devoted himself, a wealthy man, to his ancestors and his family in Chengting. Liang's gentle mother, Ts'ai's principal wife, had been poorly for years. The energetic daughter kept the two concubines under her thumb; together with her maidservants she took care of her young brothers and sisters, aided her father in the administration of his great estates. Ts'ai dearly loved his delicate wife, on whose cure he

expended half his fortune. Every Wu, every exorcist who appeared in the town found that he could earn his first taels from Ts'ai. Whole processions were organized for the healing of his wife, who grew steadily weaker and more luminous, at times bled for days on end from nose and mouth, weeping fearfully all the while. Suddenly she was gone, and no burning of the soles, no needles under fingernails could rouse her.

The frightful tenacious vampire that had sucked the woman dry must have wanted more; at all events this vigorous man, an excellent boxer and wrestler, became unnaturally gloomy after his wife's death. And something happened that was not noised abroad outside the walls of the Ts'ai household: the widower sought one moonlit night, after he had lit candles to his ancestors, to drown himself in a little pond. Made uneasy by the smell of candles in the night Liang threw a long gown around herself, ran in vain through the house to find her father, rushed into the garden. She pulled her father from the pond. Ts'ai recovered fully under his daughter's care.

But after the terrible occurrence in the garden, there was a change in his relationship with the lovely Liang. His manner grew depressed. He avoided her, clung to the two young concubines, whose delights the widower seemed only now to discover. The man, who was in his middle fifties, stupefied himself in the beauty of these women. The daughter pursued him. Her hatred for the two women swelled beyond all measure. She slandered them to Ts'ai, contrived it so that he banished the younger, a harmless, mild-natured creature.

Even this brought her no peace. Liang did not put aside the mourning she wore for her mother. At her neck was the dead woman's chain, her strings of pearls. Two silk purses containing the ashes of lotus leaves hung at her waist. From the jewel box she took two gold rings, two silver rings, betrothal presents from Ts'ai to his wife, pushed them onto her fingers. Ts'ai slipped away from the house. He visited the theatre, defeated public prize wrestlers. Gossip went around that he had a favourite in the painted houses. Before such desperate behaviour put an end to him his brother, who was living then as a graduate literatus in Taming, appeared in

Chengting to investigate the unpleasant rumours he had heard.

He reproached the man, ten years his senior, with the disgrace he was bringing to the family name, managed in the course of an impassioned boat trip to which Ts'ai submitted to secure joint supervision of his estates by the family, finally to have the banished concubine, who had borne him a son in her exile, raised to the status of wife. When the brothers returned gravely home and informed the lovely Liang of this, after some play with her rings she bowed to her father, took off the necklaces, strings of pearls, placed them on the ground in front of him, requested that before his marriage he choose a husband for her. This was Hu-tse, who had given up hope of ever possessing Liang.

Both weddings took place. Liang lived in the house of Hu-tse, who deeply adored his young wife. The cool clever man did not succeed in casting out her dark nature. At first Liang dwelt in seclusion and seemed willing to accept Hu-tse's love. She bore him no child, however. So he thought it would be better for Liang to move in society; he also had her set out in her room certain stones from the road and flowers that she should touch from time to time, for in them dwelt the souls of unborn children. The young wife laughed at it all and obeyed him.

She went to her father's house. On this occasion she found him absent. She tripped through the well-known rooms, took from a chest that she removed from a draped trunk mementoes of her mother, her father's betrothal presents, strings of pearls, lotus leaf ashes. In their place with a scornful laugh she threw the stones that Hu-tse had given her. In the following months she was much happier, with a treacherous velvety confidingness towards the man whose son she carried. At the sight of the child the hollowcheeked mother cried helplessly, sank into a stubborn gloom with frequent sobbing, clenching of fists, outbursts of rage, declared herself lost.

As soon as she was restored she had herself carried to her father's house. Without a word to her husband she had dressed herself in her wedding gown: on a whim, as she explained to pacify her maids. She wore the long veil, rings, bracelets, flowers of cloisonné. Thus she

came before her father, looking just like her mother in her younger days, in her determined face the hollow features of sickness. She bowed and said, Here she was. Ts'ai bade her welcome and was aghast. They sat down side by side to eat.

Liang sat in a happy mood beside her father, whose heart began to pound, who was torn with pain, yearning, horror. Like husband and wife they went through the rooms; Ts'ai let his beautiful daughter have her way; she embraced, kissed him. She wound her arms around his neck without shame. They strolled through the dense garden. There, in a thicket, Liang ran ahead of her father, tore off the green veil, wound it around her throat, threw herself backwards, face towards her father, arms stretched out to him, into the pond. It took Ts'ai a long time before, with the help of a gardener he sent for, he pulled the woman out; after some hours she regained consciousness. It seems that she then cursed her rescuers, on the breast of the inconsolable Ts'ai burst into tears, recriminations and confused screams. She would not release him until, all willpower gone, he hugged her and whispered amid kisses that he wanted to die with her. She lay stretched on his lap there in the room, then towards evening closed her eyes calmly, stood up and said absently that she must go home to Hu-tse. Liang's sedan chair never arrived at Hu-tse's gate. All that came, delivered next morning by an unfamiliar courier, was a letter from her to Hu-tse: she was well, as she hoped he was and the son that she had had the pleasure of bearing him; and she would always remain devoted to him, even while living separated from him.

Then, drawn by the doctrine of acquiescence, she joined up with Ma No's group outside Chengting in order to lead a life of poverty, chastity and serenity.

This was the lovely Liang-li, who in the camp had to part from her maidservants. For here no one was the servant of another. She went, like all the lilyfooted ladies, accompanied by a few men or sturdy women, to beg, sing, heal the sick.

Mrs Ch'eng sat next to her in the tall kaoliang. She was a simple vegetable hawker who lived to outward appearances in tolerable

circumstances; she was a widow since a year ago, had an older boy of twelve and also a misshapen, scrofulous, ill-natured child. After the birth of this unfortunate creature she no longer coddled her elder darling. The younger boy, whose father gave him the name “Little Grandpa”, took all her attention, and increasingly so as his peculiarities developed. Although she was convinced it was all due to the midwife being a witch, for he was already the second abnormal child the midwife had delivered in that street, and in spite of all the ashes, water and stigmata she applied, she nursed a suspicion of herself: had she neglected some precaution during her pregnancy or before, had she made too little of a second child, or what. She observed the child constantly. Of the older boy she hardly wanted to hear a word; she said spitefully that his legs were straight, so that was all right. She began to scold the neighbour women because she thought people were making fun of Little Grandpa. It came to quarrels after Mrs Ch’eng finally beat some stranger children who had been bitten or scratched by her little boy at play. For Little Grandpa was fond of doing that.

In the early days, until the child was two years old or so, she hid it in the house. She had a boundless love for the creature, in the quiet of her parlour implored it to be clever, attempted absurd medicinal and magical practices of her own devising. They were fine weeks, when she’d tried something new on the boy and now every day made hopeful observations, deceived herself here, deceived herself there. Then, disappointed, she raged at herself that she had to be at odds with the whole world on account of this cripple, left the child lying. She uttered hard curses against the devil that had been hung about her neck.

Always her concern gained the upper hand. She brought him out to mix with playmates, made sure by her intimidating manner that no one dared tease Little Grandpa, that all in fact were afraid of him, allowed themselves to be tyrannized in all sorts of ways, whereby his naughtiness flourished mightily. She would have isolated herself completely on account of the child, if the neighbours hadn’t been so understanding. Mrs Ch’eng acquired a challenging

nature; she tolerated no reference to her misbegotten child, no talk of him. She erected a wall of brusque defensiveness, not only where Little Grandpa was concerned. Her gossiping, her earthy humour disappeared for ever. She became a quick-tempered, unsociable woman.

At this time the great rumours came of the new, powerful sorcerers who were spreading south and east from the Nank'ou mountains. Reports multiplied. They struck the woman like bright lightning; she ran to the yamen, to the marketplace, where stories were told, soaked up the news, took it home with her. She was affectionate with Little Grandpa and the older boy, spoke excitedly to everyone she knew in the street; as the Truly Powerless drew near to Chengting entrusted the older boy and all her property to her next door neighbour, said she was off travelling for a few days, and walked to Ma No's camp. There is no need to report how she and others fared there. They did not find what they sought, and realized at last that they had achieved everything imaginable. None of their wishes was fulfilled; they were divested of every wish.

Ma No's horde encamped in the lush countryside west of the great swamp of Talu.

It was already the fifth month.

Such mild sweet breezes wafted through the summery air.

Towards evening a confusion of scents drifted across from the flowery banks around the edges of the swamp, like music snatched by the wind's breath. A host of dazed pensive spirits darted across in phosphorous gleams, dimmed over the ground, tried to attach themselves to humans. Magnificent catalpa trees stood widely spaced on the long hills. Thick brown knurls swelled in sprays of bushy green twigs, thick and luxuriant as if the trees could not inhale enough of the blue wind, could not capture in their broad crowns enough of the hot golden drops of Yang. Every heart-shaped leaf showed off a glossy green, revealed without shame the closemeshed veinwork of its entrails. When a breeze came by from

over the swamp, the naked leaves trembled, tossed, pushed the little spirits aside with a flick of the tongue, pressed lovingly together. Suspended from the swaying green mass, the green hanging carpet, tawny strands hung down on stalks and dropped curling on the grass like tawny writhing rainworms stunned by the fall, scattered all over the lovely moss. Where the hills levelled off and became valleys the ornamental micanthus grew rampant, erect manhigh stalks, bushes diagonally striped like a zebra, motionless tapering yellow and green on which drops of clear rain impaled themselves and their spectra.

On this fecund soil, turning already under the hoe as they came in from the west, Ma No's band camped in peace. They awaited the arrival of Wang Lun, who a week ago had already reached Chu's more easterly band.

It was on the seventh day of the fifth month that a young weak brother was carried in after being found unconscious on the open road. The five days' fast that he had imposed on himself after an ecstasy was too much for him. The long, light man, who wore over both arms a sort of cowl fixed by a cord, was dragged in by a treetrunk of a man in soldier's tunic; he bent his sweating head far forward to shade the face of the young man with his enormous straw hat. Everywhere shacks and tents had been set up, as if by an army. Ma No had twenty men take turns at pushing sailcarts with planks at the head and rear of the main column, for ailments caused by cold and damp were spreading through the brothers and sisters. In the shade of the catalpa trees the soldier, a deserter from the provincial garrison, laid down his burden on dry moss in front of a tent, poured green liquid from a tiny black glass flask onto the unconscious man's scabbed lips, dabbed two drops behind each ear. The man groaned, tried to wipe off the drops behind his ears, chewed his lips, opened his eyes. The soldier regarded him, ordered him to hold his breath, now breathe slowly, now hold his breath.

The sun set. Ma No leaned against the boards of his hut until the grey dusk fell, counted, calculated, looked through hollowed hand at the stars, clutched his breast, lay with his forehead on the ground.

Tomorrow was the Day of Perfection of Sakyamuni the Pure, the swordbearer of penetrating wisdom.

When Ma got up and squatted in the warm moss he began to smile reflectively, smoothed by the dark air. His eyes glittered; they stood out yellow in their narrow slits like puppies snapping from a half open box. People walked past him with paper lanterns, a happy singing of many voices came down from the women's camp on the eastern hill. Now and again hard rhythmic calls of men. Somewhere people were praying. An impenetrable, heavy, fat-bodied sky pressed close to an earth that seemed, now the sun had left it, to be its kin; with a million twinkling stars it whispered anxiously to something near, came begging to this earth that it was wont, with imperial indifference, to let roll about its swollen feet. An accusing "caw, caw" approached, whirred around, thudded against the boards. Birds swept across from the thicket of bamboo, flew close by Ma's shelter into the fields of micanthus. Ma closed his eyes. He saw the satyr birds as they flew in summer on Nank'ou and over the southern mountains: turquoise horns, round dark eyes in a black head; fiery swollen breast and belly; on the brown coat and brown wings of the little creatures shimmered eyeshaped rings. How they screamed.

Tomorrow they would celebrate the Perfection of glorious Sakyamuni. Ma did not move. They followed him, trusted him. Their welfare lay in his hands. He tasted bitterness on his gums and swallowed. Everything would row, swim, fly to the islands in the great ocean, everything would be for the best, everything was for the best: the boat prepared, the oarsmen ready, the rudder firmly mounted. Kuan-yin was the Ship-goddess who piloted the Traverse, standing in the bows, directing the wind. They chanted in front of their tents, the women sang, all lay snug in the shadow of Kuan-yin. He the bo'sun, the true helmsman. His welfare lay in their hands; he sought himself between their palms, saw himself crushed, pulverized, strewn over the grass. The wise prior of P'ut'o once refused him the class he wanted, the instruction of novices; he was a wise prior; now he had novices, as many as he wanted, they followed him wherever

he wanted, and he was no longer proud.

Bent over himself, Ma concealed his cold face in his hands. And he concealed from himself that softly, sharply, he hated them, with a twitching unearthly pain that he could feel behind his breastbone. “Wang Lun,” he groaned. Ma No saw him as the others did: mythically large. “Wang Lun, Wang Lun,” whimpered Ma No. He felt unclear things stirring in him, Wang Lun could straighten everything out. What terrible journey was that- to Shantung, to the White Waterlily, and he didn’t come, and he didn’t come back.

And he was coming back too late. Where was it heading? They had all grown calm and bright, with a peculiar kind of hopefulness. He had come to nothing. His golden Buddhas, the thousand-armed crystal Goddess were dragged along behind him in their cart like a meal from which he never ate. In his daily toil for the brothers was no absorption, no self-subjugation. His feet no longer trod the four steps of holiness: now caught by the current, born again, never born, Arhat, Lohan, sinless worthy, yeah, regarding with the same eye gold and clay, sandalwood and the axe that will fell it. Nothing, nothing more of the Paradise where they shrink from each other, spirits of the finite light, the unconscious, those who feel no pain, the dwellers in nothingness, and those who are where there is neither thinking nor not-thinking. Silent and mild the golden Buddhas sat before him on the Nank’ou Pass, earlobes extending to their shoulders, blue hair knotted over round foreheads with the third eye of enlightenment, distant gazes, radiant, almost evanescent smiles on protruding lips, squatting on slim round shanks, feet turned soles up like a child in its mother’s womb. Nothing more of that. And nothing of Wang, of calm, serenity; he took no part in the growing Circle of Piety. Nor in anything else.

Tomorrow they would celebrate the Perfection of glorious Sakyamuni.

Ma No removed his hot shaking fingers from his face, laid hands together on his breast, placed his fingers in the holy mudra position, sent himself into a trance in the sweet dark summer night.

He got up, struck a light for his paper lantern, went into some of

the men's huts and said with rigid composure that tomorrow was the Day of Perfection of Most-holy Buddha; they must build a barque to celebrate the Blessed Traverse. As he walked across to the women's camp, a confusion of bright lanterns moved swiftly up the other hill, where piles of planks lay that the men had not used for building huts. Twenty paces from the first of the women's tents Ma No came to a halt on the slope, swung his lantern, said very softly as three women ran up to him that tomorrow was the day of Sakyamuni's Perfection; the brothers would construct the barque of the Blessed Traverse. He bade the sisters think on the succouring Goddess of the Traverse.

In the morning conches blared from the men's hill: five notes. With thin ropes they hauled a long, crudely built barque out from the darkness under the catalpas, pushed it carefully supported at the sides and stern down into the micanthus bushes, which the ship parted like waves. A long procession of girls and women emerged from the rough scratching stalks; at the head were young ones, bearing on upstretched arms a huge brightly coloured cloth doll. They thronged around Ma No's tent.

Ma stood in the open, silent, in full priestly garb with the sulphur yellow robe and sumptuous red sash, crowned with the black four-cornered hat, his head bowed, hands in the mudra position. The women with the doll knelt to him. A long time passed before he noticed them. They asked that his Goddess of rock crystal yield up some of her spirit to their effigy, open their Goddess to the light. Ma No seemed bleary; his voice was flat. He lay a good while in his tent, where they had placed the doll next to his Kuan-yin; he seemed to be praying. Then the women came in. One held a small wooden dish containing red juice with a stalk floating in it. Ma took the stalk, dabbed red spots: eyes, mouth, nostrils, ears. Now the doll could see, taste, smell, hear, had a soul, was Kuan-yin, Goddess of the Barque.

Into the surrounding villages ten men and ten women went this day healing, working, helping, begging. There were long hours of prayer in the miscanthus fields, men in one line, women in another; Ma No in front of the ship. A handbell tinkled; all fell on their

foreheads; the priest recited in a monotone; from time to time the congregation joined in. When the sun no longer shone directly overhead the men and women sat together around the ship with the bright Goddess leaning against its mast, and ate their midday meal.

Storytellers went around, leapers and jugglers demonstrated their skills, a few former courtesans who had been making music in various parts of the valley came together; as they approached the barque, circling hand in hand around the Kuan-yin, sang the joyful Song of the Green Crag; from many throats, repeated many times, the fine sweet song rose over the low hills, echoed from the trees.

Striking the ground rapidly with boards, they smoothed a heap of earth thrown up at the top of the women's hill, invited a young eunuch and a large-eyed slender courtesan to dance. So the eunuch came out first onto the stage, visible to all in the micanthus field and on the slope of the men's hill, with the limbs of a gazelle, gazing around out of proud enraptured eyes. He wore an ordinary loose tunic and flapping trousers of a black material; everyone knew he'd brought a great chest of clothes with him from Peking when he fled to Ma No. In this loose black garb, queue wound up in a knot, his arms now raised lightly, he danced.

He went slack-kneed back and forth, sank down slowly until he sat on his heels, straightened again by fits and starts and brought his arms, palms turned outwards, more and more rapidly together above his head. Then he stood still, turned his face to the side so that his radiant smile could be seen, and with one leg placed in front of the other began to make strange movements with body and arms. He leaned far to the right, laid his arms together on his breast, leaned far to the left, gyrated his body; now, body held still, moved his arms so they fluttered, coiled, sought beside him. He swung his arms sharply round, and again they fluttered gently, coiled, sought. Now his little feet quickly placed themselves one before the other, tripping on the spot; at the same time the arms flew to one side, the movement being followed to the tips of the outstretched fingers. It seemed that the body was under a spell, sought in vain to run after hands, fingers. The movement of the feet became ever wilder,

jerking, jumping, until the dancer managed with a great spring to the right, a great spring to the left to free himself from the spot, until he bounded high, crouched low in a joyful frenzy, sinking down to the ground on one side, and with a shake forced himself back to the spot. Now the large-eyed courtesan glided up to him, her low round forehead bare, black hair bound in the chignon of the thirteen braids, a plump well-shaped face, a long shirtlike tunic of light grey over her slender figure, at her ankles tongues of white protruding from violet leggings. In her left hand she held a grassgreen girdle.

She began with brief head movements to both sides. Then came a nodding, lifting, a slow luxurious circling of the head. As the sequence began again the hands that had been hanging limp from tight pressed arms came into play, swung at first unnoticeably and then more strongly in front of the violet legs, lifted the forearms high. Both arms stretched: with swirling hand movements she jerked her hips abruptly sideways, and the movement was carried down to the legs. At first they were pulled along with the swing of the hips; then, infected, stimulated, impassioned they swayed to the left, to the right, paced, jerked, trembled in their own way. Strong thighs pressed together; calves weaved around each other, knees flicked apart, came together. Thus the girl leapt, girdle balanced on both arms, around the marked-off stage and the young eunuch who accompanied her in an undefinable rhythm of head and hand movements. They danced about each other, side by side. The eunuch sank to the earth, arms raised rhythmically, and slowly and forcefully pushed his tender body up from the ground; the courtesan stood stiffly over him, arms diagonally across her forehead. As he swung his arms one last time, she dropped onto her heels and, meeting her fingers from above with his own widespread, he drew her up. As if they were fishes they swam with straight fingers, outstretched arms towards each other.

In costumes from the young eunuch's collection, they danced for the insatiable audience the dance of the peacock feathers, of the red and black ribbons. Male and female were indistinguishable. As evening fell everyone began to stir. The barque must begin its

voyage with the departing sun. The women squatted together in conclave; over their knees were long slips of coloured paper on which they scribbled their names and those of loved ones, inscribed spells against ghosts, diseases, ran to the barque and threw the slips at the feet of the effigy. Late in the afternoon the barque had been gaily decorated by the men with red paper, long pennants fixed at the mast, little sails attached to strings; it was studded with a thousand red eyes. In a dense crowd they all stood around the ship; the handbell clanged. Now fire blazed up, burning strips of paper flew onto the planks, over the deck. The crowd shrank back. The ship took fire at bow and stem; bright red flames flitted up sailropes, devoured sails, and all at once the rigging flared in dazzling light. An “Ayi” of awe; they raised their hands. The light died. The Goddess stood; the deckboards and the planks of the sides burned smokily, crackling, spitting sparks. The people prostrated themselves with ceaseless anxious prayers that the Goddess might take their wishes with her on her voyage. The smoke grew thicker, the cracking of the wood louder; the flames worked briskly. A whitish glow, whose brightness swiftly increased, sometimes subsided in order to spring cautiously up again, broke through the billows. The mast and the Goddess now stood in smoke; something calm, brown-black could be made out. Wider and higher the flames flared, writhed like clouds around each other. They trickled like thin sand between the seams of the planking, grasped with dripping hands at the beautifully carved oars, pulled at them like brawny sailors. The fiery pennants fluttered more gorgeous than red paper. Then the glow lost all redness. A white even light shone dazzling, and now—. Everyone retreated. Sizzling, blue steaming in a sea of white; long motionless lines of smoke above the glow.

As the roar of the flames died away, Kuan-yin vanished. From all sides they pressed close around the barque through the thick smoke. The superstructure and the slips of paper were consumed; they poked gaily, vainly after bits of paper on the shimmering wood; the Goddess had set off joyfully on her Traverse. Conversing softly the people scattered.

Night fell. On the hills, under the catalpas, in the moss, in the field of micanthus they slept. Through the irregular rows of tents a lanky man clambered carefully in the dark without a lantern, slipped a little way down the hill, pranced into the valley: he was the band's night watchman. He walked through the pitch blackness, peered right, peered left, carried a little box in his hand. He called himself the "Twilight Man"; no one knew his proper surname. He was greatly esteemed in the band, this elderly man who had attached himself to them a few li outside Chengting. There were days when he was quite agitated, roared, ran behind the column holding a little metal mirror, barked at it like a dog, drove stragglers on, warned, pointed at his mirror yelling. Under his tunic around his neck a sword hung, woven from horsehair, long and thin, its handle a piece of wood decorated with little tassels of hair; it was thought to possess great powers. In the box he carried the "King of the Left Side": this was one of his shadows, which a base deceiver had once stolen away from him. The Twilight Man intercepted the shadow late one afternoon when it was playing tricks on him again, locked it up in the little box; if the King of the Left Side escaped, its triumphant owner would fear for his life.

The man slept only a few hours each evening. He spent the night searching for one of his shadows, called Hai-ling-t'ai, which became visible only under special precautions in the thickest darkness.

The Twilight Man went on tiptoe around the burnt-out barque through the bushes, bent soft stems aside, crouched down tensely watchful. Now and again a broad stem nodded; then he would grip it with his foot, feel it suspiciously, keep watch. As the night advanced, he heard immediately behind him a shout: "Twilight Man, Twilight Man!" He stayed rooted to the spot, felt for his hair sword. After a silence it came again, testily: "Twilight Man!" He got up, strutted, head hunched between his shoulders, after the voice. Hailing-t'ai wanted to negotiate with him.

Glided into a narrow gangway between two rows of huts. There on a stick an uncovered lantern blinked; a little man stood in the gangway, called "Twilight Man!" It was Ma No that the old

soothsayer was approaching. Ma No whispered to him to watch his hut tonight. As soon as dawn broke, he was to go in; Ma No had a little errand for the Twilight Man.

While outside the peering about, the striking at the air began again, inside the event was consummated which decided the fate of those sleeping on the two hills and in the valley.

When the Twilight Man saw a grey gleam in the sky he marched stiffly into the hut, where Ma No was lying on a sack of straw but quickly stood up. He embraced the old man and clung to his breast. The old man smiled menacingly over the bent head, waved his sword threateningly in the eight heavenly directions. The little priest mumbled, “Twilight Man, you will bring joy to your brothers. Go to all the huts and tents of the men and wake each and every one. Ma No asks them to assemble in the open place where we celebrated the Perfected Buddha. They must come at once. Before the sun rises, this poor brother beseeches them.”

They crept down from the hill. Milling of lanterns between coalblack trunks. Chattering teeth, subdued voices, yawning, lame bones, pushing, tramping. When they stood in the open place in the valley, there was a wooden snapping and creaking. Disturbed by the jostling the remains of the barque collapsed. The half charred mast swished sideways, splinters flew, tore holes in lanterns. The men stacked up planks, squatted, waited.

Ma No came in his torn bright gown. Behind him the Twilight Man swaggered solemnly; on his arm he brandished Ma’s clerical gown, sash and cap. When an elevated space was cleared for Ma on the pile of planks, his companion put the clothes down next to him, first stabbing with his index finger in the eight heavenly directions. Ma’s eyes were swollen and red, his bleached face bloated from crying, bloody scratch marks on hands and forearms.

The multitude and their leader, the invincible sorcerer, sat dumbly facing each other, wall facing wall. Those sitting nearest looked at Ma’s sash. Their unease conveyed itself to those farther away. They roused him, called to him. He must speak.

He stood up, turned his priest’s cap in his hands. He explained

haltingly that for years up on Nank'ou Pass he'd served the golden Buddhas in vain. The man from Hunkang-ts'un appeared, and now he was on the right track. But Wang Lun had been away for months, he hadn't come back, he wasn't coming back, and if Wang Lun came back now, he'd be too late. That's what he wanted to say to them.

Ma No relapsed into himself. When he lifted his eyelids he looked out exhausted, from overlarge bleary eyerings. His voice sounded completely changed, soft, close, like the voice of an intimate friend.

"What's happened? Has someone hurt you? What have they done to you?"

He repeated three, five, ten times that he wanted to speak to them, choked on his spittle, hunched his arms, turned aside from a lantern that someone held to his face, whispered, "Amitofo, Amitofo, Amitofo." And then he cried out loud in a voice that cut to the heart, "I want to leave. I have no part in you, as you voyage across the foamy white sea. I wasn't taken into the Circle of Piety. I must sacrifice myself for you, I know I must, because anything else is denied me. But this poor brother who is not your brother can no longer live. I want to leave. Curse me, or don't curse me. Your poor brother is bound beyond salvation to the Wheel of Existence, and so weeps before you."

The men prayed. Clear heads were filled with deep dismay. "What do you want?"

"You don't have to lead us anymore. We'll take turns."

"Be patient, Ma No. Wang Lun's only two hundred li behind us."

"Ma, a demon's got hold of you. Believe me, it's a demon."

"You're our brother. We're no purer than you. You mustn't despair. Stay here, stay with us, Ma!"

"What do you want?"

Ma's agitation increased. Their calls did not reach him.

"I want to leave. I'm bound to the Wheel of Existence. It will drag me through all the impure animals and plants. I shan't resist, no, I shan't resist any more. I've resisted fate up to this moment, when I heard the Twilight Man searching for his Hai-ling-t'ai in the field of micanthus. My shadow has been stolen from me. I wasn't as clever

as the Twilight Man. I haven't a sword as good as his. I haven't a box like him. I don't keep such a good lookout. My shadow is not the King of the Left Side, I've lost my Hai-ling-t'ai too, and my Lu-fu and So-kuan and Tsao-yao. Whoever loses all his shadows must seek them or die. Forgive me, my brothers, for not resisting any more, for submitting to my fate. Not in silence, for I'm not capable of that, but groaning, howling, rending my flesh. I must go to the light that shines on me. Forgive me, my brothers."

The men sat there stupidly. Ma was cudgelling them. Most heads were lowered; they held their breath.

"I've summoned you here before daybreak because on this day of the glorious Sakyamuni's Perfection I want to have done with you. For myself I don't want perfection, merely an ending. Your poor brother no longer believes in perfection for himself. He didn't throw a slip bearing his name to the hundred-armed lady in the barque, for he has long known that she wouldn't take him with her. Look at me, a man who sighs, and groans, and so—goes in freedom."

He twisted his swollen mouth so that he appeared to be smiling. He bent down, searched with his hands on the boards, lifted up his yellow cowl, rocked it in his arms. Ma No was frantic with distress. "Better for me if I'd never met Wang Lun! Oh that I'd never seen Wang Lun, my yellow silken flower. In my hut on Nank'ou I spat on myself, here I must tear my own entrails."

Took a lantern from the man next to him, held it in front of him, above him, stretched forward, cocked an ear towards the black silent crowd. Cranes flew over from the swamp. Then with both arms he swung the cowl around like a banner and cried, "Do you know where he's going to, Ma No the priest of Kuan-yin from P'ut'o-shan, friend of the Wu-wei, teacher of the precious laws? Where he's fleeing to? I'll tell you gladly what I've known for weeks already, ever since Wang Lun made me come along with you. Ever since he gave me pot and beans and was too busy to tell me how to cook them. He's forsaken me. He's no right to set evil spirits on me if I forsake him. Yenlo-wang, king of the Underworld, knows the bitterness I taste in forsaking Wang. Do you know what this freedom

is that Ma No is going to? Twilight Man? Sui, Tuan, Chang, any of you?"

Now he gave a feverish laugh that burst like a soap bubble, trilled in the soft cadence that today he discovered for the first time.

"I am going—to a woman on the other hill, who may already be waiting for me, dear brothers. So now you know. The secret is out."

A sobbing and roaring of that terrible kind when old men cry erupted from the dark crowd. No one moved, raised his head. The little priest stepped down from the boards. He went past the front row of squatting men, no one looking at him. At the stem of the barque where the broken rudder lay someone plucked at his gown. Ma stood still. Out of the dark a gigantic man loomed over him, spoke down at him in a hard voice: "Brother, we've a branch waiting for you."

Disdainfully Ma pulled his gown free. Ten hands grasped at the giant, who snarled in a cold voice, "He's betraying us. The rules don't mean a thing here. He's for the nearest tree, brothers."

Two men stood in his way, stolid peasants who had been a week with the group. They pulled his hands away. "You're not a judge. We're all brothers. If you hurt Ma we'll cut your hands off."

While the giant was still glaring at them they got him by the legs and tipped him onto the ground, pressed him down. He howled, scrabbled at their trousers. Torches, lumps of wood flew over them from behind. A crowd formed around the struggling figures, separated them. They were panting.

That dreadful crying rose convulsively from the dark crowd. "Where is Wang Lun? Why doesn't Wang Lun come back to us?"

"Let us pray, dear brothers," someone called out. "Let our circle form itself. The time of the Maitreya is not yet. Let us pray. We are lost."

The men bent their backs, rubbed their foreheads on the wet moss. Over the grey field the imploring sutra of subjugation drained from a thousand mouths.

A young man, the engraver Hsi, unremarkable features, broad jutting chin, sprang long-legged through the rows, clambered

clumsily over the backs of some, planted himself on the heap of planks, shrilled in ecstasy, gesticulated: “Only prayer can help us. Maitreya is coming. We must create the hour, the place, where Maitreya will come. Pray, for the sake of all five treasures, pray. Don’t lie there. Form the circle. You are my brothers. Stand by me.”

He grimaced fiercely, whirled his arms like windmills, threw himself foaming onto the boards, tumbled down from them in a spasm.

The dull weeping in the crowd deepened to a groan, to helpless wracking sobs. Necks craned towards the convulsing engraver. Eyes rolled the longer they stared; the field and the grey hill swam. Mouths gaped. They all smiled strangely and made faces as if they were excited and curious. Spittle dribbled down chins, they snuffled, they fell without noticing into a regular swaying to left and right. Then suddenly they all wanted to ask Hsi something. But when they stood up, their forearms, knees and necks started trembling. A shaking, sliding of limbs, rigidity, straining of necks backwards; their grins grew wider. It twitched pleasantly over thighs, abdomens, flanks, threw them about.

A red wave broke over the valley.

The Twilight Man and ten others wandered here and there through the field, the reed stalks, thorny twigs. They jumped on the chests of the fallen, stroked hands and mouths, fanned the dangerous humours from them, stabbed them with thorns under the nipple, on the crown, babbling, warding off, swerving, pouncing.

The little bent man on the broken rudder turned his head to every side, looked long at this one and that one. He had no thoughts. He beamed. Why had they all fallen down. How cleverly that one leaped. They must take red hot needles and stick them under toenails, to wake them up. When he heard sobbing nearby his ribcage heaved like a mountain in an earthquake, his throat became hot, a smooth hand kneaded his oesophagus like a sausage, up and down, twisted it; he cried with them. Soft and gurgling, taking care not to stop, making it flow for ever, this unknown warm spring that trickled over his lips, fingertips, nails, that he dabbed on temples

and ears, washed and washed his hands in.

The stony howling in the valley died away. Everywhere they exchanged hoarse cries, thrust themselves from one another. They had rolled in a tangle of bodies. One got up rubbing a crushed shinbone. One sat gazing, as if at jewels, at charred fragments of wood under his knees, put a sliver to his lips, licked with the tip of his tongue. They wiped spittle from chins with slow, broken movements, yawned, belched, spat. Slack bodies brooded next to each other, wrinkled gloomy brows. Suddenly, as if touched by a breath, they focussed eyes on each other in recognition, lumbered to their feet.

A buzz, hasty questions: "Ma No's leaving. There he is on the rudder, crying." Some wanted to throw themselves down before him, he must stay, desperate. But these were brief twitches, muscle-imaginings.

The crowd, fearful again, restrained itself once more in great urgent expectation. A hand movement, a watchful squint, a throat clearing might tip the scales. Several couldn't stand the tension; weak still from the excitement just past they sought to cast the burden from them somehow. It was best to consult the feng-shui, to determine the constellation of day, hour, place, wind, water, the vibrations of the land, win clarity from the throw of little wooden spills. A man sought at his belt for the spills in the midst of the silent throng; others saw, stood up at once, cleared a space for him. Others mistook this rising and movement, as if those consulting the future had declared for Ma No and were going to sit by him. They moved to join them. They were held back unsteadily; someone called out, "Speak up! Say what it is you want! Speak!"

The little priest from Nank'ou at first only half noticed what was happening. He had been afraid they'd abuse and beat him. But that no one had a thought of leaving him—him, the little penitential misfit, who cast his consecration from him and accepted hopeless banishment to the Cycle of Rebirth—this could not easily come through to him. And when it came through, it crashed over him. It burst his breast with elbows from within, heaved from his entrails

over his heart that stood still, pulsated in a wild rhythm, bells rang, judgement trumpeted, spread through arms and throat; and when it tried to play about his lips his head nodded, dangled onto his breast. He swooned, came slowly to with ears full of hymns, clung to the Twilight Man. He was radiant. Warm water flowed again over his face.

He let the old man go, clambered onto the heap of planks. “Brothers, are we free?” he stammered, swallowing the tears. “Until today I’ve been carrying around a stone, an evil unruly spirit that stole me away. I pray to Kuan-yin, who has not heard me, I call to Maitreya, who shall hear me. I will stay poor, little, one of the Truly Powerless who does not avert fate; I will nourish no demons within me and become prey to werewolves. I will remain a poor son of the poor Eighteen Provinces. You do not revile me; ah, you do not revile me; you are good. I don’t know what I’m saying. I don’t even know myself; it’s too dark. Whoever’s soul is free can find the Western Paradise. I haven’t yielded to the cravings of the flesh; I’ve purified myself for a joyous heaven; I’ve forced my imprisoned souls onto the path of the Supreme Lord and want to go and teach them and want to follow them. And find the magic key to K’unlun. With you, my brothers.”

He exulted much more in this vein. The morning field was quite empty. A multitude surrounded him, embraced him, kissed his feet, tore his gown to pieces.

Dazzling stripes coursed over the black clouds to the east. The universal smoky grey lightened rapidly. It was mined from within, sprung and blown away. The lush landscape widened. It flashed with little ponds. In the southeast, by the swamp of Talu, there was already a slender thread-thin gleam; now the sun bored a hole, a cylinder, a funnel, and long rays streamed down through it, igniting more and more fiercely the green of grass and trees.

The eyes of the younger men flickered over the stalks of grass up to the women’s hill. “Our sisters, our sisters,” they said, looked full

of doubt at one another with quaking knees; several embraced trembling, stood there, comforted one another as if misfortune were about to fall.

A gigantic village schoolmaster stroked the boyish fellow who snuggled up to his sleeves. “You will seek,” whispered the schoolmaster, “Chi, the peach blossom.”

“Chi—I won’t seek her, I won’t. Oh, what is happening to us.”

Several stretched their bodies in the grass, threw themselves face down, chewed stalks, expressions dangerous; they grappled with uncovered memories, waited impatient on the tumult that would restore desire to them.

Many climbed to the summit of the men’s hill and lurched about beneath the green clouds of the catalpas: smiled, prayed, dreamed, never took their eyes from the women’s hill. Heaped up riches! A wave dashed over breasts, against hips.

A few of them stood up as a faint tinkling came from the women’s hill. Without a word they set off one behind the other, kept looking round at the rest. They reached the foot of the hill half running. In the tall grass black lumps with clothes, skulls, knees heaved groaning, opened eyes wide and shut them. They ran surefooted as forest creatures. Their eyes enticed. They called the lumps by name, showed their faces alight with promise; their smiles pumped hot throbbing blood into temples, eyes, feet.

The engraver Hsi ran ahead of the others along a path that led around a pond and avoided the camp road. Not far from the foot of the women’s hill they clumped together. Hsi called, “How shall we do it? Let’s trick them, brothers. Let’s pray with them.”

“Send someone to them, tell them to assemble.”

They heard someone call out, “This is terrible.” Someone pushed through the rest; it was the young man. He ran from them. Hsi crowed, “I’ll call them, you come behind me.” As he zigzagged ahead, the brothers seethed meekly, arms folded, heads bowed, ball by pigtailed ball, up the hill. The strident chirping of crickets accompanied their murmured “Amitofo, Amitofo.”

They stood on the women’s hill under the dense foliage. Under the

foliage swarmed a throng, the sight of which made the hearts of these brothers contract deeper and slower and such full pulses surged through them that the soft forest floor beneath their feet swayed slowly with them, bore each surge onwards. Runaway wives looked out of curious and wondering eyes across at the brothers; it seemed to worry them still that the air had such unhindered access to their faces and everyone could see their mouths. Courtesans pushed forward, graceful among blind beggars, market women, bright points in the field of radiant flowers, bringers of happiness, hua-k'uei, their gravity incomparable; about their gentle persons wafted the breath of the Pavilion of a Hundred Fragrances. Timid daughters of respectable families ducked their little protected bodies down in the moss; they hugged their rosaries, breathed prayers as if they were facing a dreaded classroom exercise from the *San-tzu-ching*.

Below the leaf dark hill Ma No walked along the path through the camp. With a dismissive gesture a broad hand pushed aside the grey dawn mass in the sky. The white swans of light rose in pomp into the sky.

How the women's hill began to tremble

and a thousand-tongued crying and screaming swept across the valley, was thrown back from the other hill

and the horror repeated itself tenfold, a deep rumbling, cracking, roaring mixed with the piercing voices

and eye shutting dread tried to flee the shadow of the catalpas and was dragged back

and after minutes of this fury white and coloured clothing spurted over the crest, collapsed, dived into the moss, rolled noiselessly down

and on the hill a strange silence set in, interrupted by long saccadic cries, catlike penetrating yowls, music to breathless swooning that gnaws its fingers, shrivels its soul as if in vinegar, whirls its body about itself in a frenzy of despair.

Then men's voices rang into the valley: "Ma No, Ma No, the dragon's flying away! Ma No, our sisters!"

It hurtled over the narrow alley in the camp; heads cocked

upwards, eyes looked at each other; they stopped their ears, pounded breasts. It shattered over Ma No. As people dashed about him he thought himself for longer than a moment a lord of the underworld with a hundred arms, scourges, serpents, driving feverish souls within the walls of the Ice Hell, down and down from glassy smooth walls into the devouring acid bath; they rasped and grinned, he was bursting with joy, rocked his head. Running with blood it pressed in upon him. Already a weakness was daubing the entire inner surface of his skull. Half swooning he felt what was happening, groaned, propped himself up, balanced the load.

He looked about him with a cold glow. Realization, shock, with it a glittering sense of power leapt out of him, laid about him, coldly eyeing.

"It is willed. I shall take this upon myself."

Two deep breaths. He turned round in a daze; the verdant landscape was unchanged. He discovered with concealed horror that something unknown had emerged from him, and conquered. That he had overcome Wang Lun. An intoxicating fear flowed through the marrow of his bones.

They lay distraught in the micanthus. Weak cries for help from the women's hill. Ma No had led them into error.

Ma No's empty, distant gaze wandered over them, turned away. They pressed their bodies into the ground. The hill crepitated back at them.

Immobility, hours long, sun-drenched wilderness. From the huts on the women's hill sighs of enchantment rose unheard, stole faintly through the boards, curled like smoke, straying glance, dying notes of a tom-tom under the green overarching roof.

When the sun grew hotter the conches in front of Ma's hut blew into the valley, five notes one after the other five times: the summons to a general assembly.

Bushes shook, leaves jostled together, backs bent, heads appeared.

For a long time nothing stirred on the women's hill. Then spots flickered white, bright-coloured, between the tree trunks. Shadow-black men running, mingled flecks of colour, noises scattering,

voices, ragged shouts, surge of sound. Bright sisters embraced as they came down, brothers hip by hip. A jubilant lightsoaked cloud descended into the valley.

Now the sisters dispersed among the serious men laughing, with jaunty movements, in wide arcs filling the space where the charred ribs of the barque still speared the air. Ma No, sulphur yellow and red, strode quick and firm into the milling throng that sucked everyone into itself.

He moved not a muscle when, striking up somewhere, borne by female voices, a hymn of joy rose loud, clear and sweet over the flowery field, a song they all knew, sung by the tender inmates of the painted houses when they glide invitingly across pools in their carved boats.

Ma No spoke: “May there be peace between us, dear brothers and sisters. May nothing weigh us down as we sail to the golden isles. Let us conclude that ancient peace between Yin and Yang. I rejoice that you have listened to me, and shall not forget it even were I to possess the Five Precious Things. We shall remain Truly Powerless. We shall follow the Tao, hearken to its course. Pray tirelessly, and you shall attain a miraculous power that will stay with you for ever. You shall not vainly build wooden horses like that old man in the state of Lu, driven by springs of metal, able to draw men and carts. You shall not make such wooden horses of your souls, the souls that dwell in your lungs, your sluicing blood, your soft quivering entrails. You play a flute across the land and warm the air to make the corn shoot tall. Yeah, with the blowing of your reeds you shall cause the clouds to pile up in the northwest; rain will flow, typhoons arise. Eight steeds are ready, the sun makes sixteen stations, you shall traverse them in one day.

“Remain poor, be happy, harbour no desires lest you regret and so become impure and full of care. I see you, my sisters, you queens of tender joy, much of it is your doing that our affairs have taken this course. That the openings of our hearts no longer flow into the universal void. I was a bad son of the Eighteen Provinces, to trust in the wisdom of alien Sakyamuni and accept his heaven in the place

of your, of our, flowery heaven. We stand on the steps to the Western Paradise. What you Broken Melons have given to us, we receive. We owe you thanks. We owe you thanks. I call myself, with you, a Broken Melon. And so shall we all call ourselves, here at the swamp of Talu."

Airjarring whoops and claps, sinking to the ground, embracing.

A thronging, wall-solid, around Ma No, whose enigmatic impassive face none saw. Words emerged from him like the chirping of a concealed songbird behind a crumbling temple. His face had taken on a new resemblance, the expression of a flying animal whose headshape, eyes, feathers are modelled entirely by the wind through which it travels; perched on a branch it has an inexplicable appearance: for wind and flight are absent.

Midday. They scattered, the fickle, the earnest, the joyful, high spirited, the blind, the weak, strong men, light dancing girls, the ardent prophets.

At evening for the first time the tents and board huts enfolded those who had teamed up together. They prayed side by side, their prayers lost themselves in the dark. It was not butterflies that rose up out of the grass, but two threads that drew themselves straight up, grew tangled and now were useless for weaving. Their folded arms parted slackly, they felt for each other in the dark with damp hands, slid over electric twitching faces. All pride was broken here, all discontent laid to rest. Those who had entered firm and upright into the earnestness of the Truly Powerless bent under the happiness; the summer wind blew like a banner planted on one of the stages to K'unlun. How uniformly mild these faces grew in the dark of the huts under the catalpas, spirits and bodies loosened by a wide violent harrow that rolled across the entire earth and toiled, delved in the night.

In the swamp of Talu lotus flowers grew; they covered the motionless water with green shiny leaves as big as plates, red flowers appeared among them; long stems that gripped with

thickveined leaves over rotting mussels; every stem was yarned with thin threads of algae that deep down formed mats; green hairy heads hung down. The swamp lay unfathomable, and steamed.

The night did not pass without a terrible incident. Several times through the stillness some men heard the lively scolding of the Twilight Man. They took no notice, assumed he was having a fight with one of his shadows. But he kept crying out, and it occurred to some who left their huts that the Twilight Man wasn't doing his rounds and the cries came always from the same spot on the men's hill. They were afraid he'd really caught hold of a shadow; shied from witnessing the struggle. But finally five men looked at one another uneasily, took courage, ran through the field and up the hill with lanterns. When they came to the source of the cries they found the Twilight Man working away in the grass and under him a man who didn't move; the Twilight Man was waving his sword over the man's swollen face. He called the motionless body by name, held a mirror to his ear. The men leaned over the body, shone a light in the goggling eyes. It was the despondent young man; he'd hanged himself from a tree. The Twilight Man had run into the corpse, and cut it down. One of the men took a little sharp stone, scratched the skin on his arm, dribbled hot blood into the clenched mouth that two men forced open. It was no use; the body was stiff. He hadn't sought Chi, the peach blossom. That evening as he walked back with her and stood in front of her hut, they had gazed earnestly at each other; the pupils of their steepslanting eyes widened, but they both remained calm and parted after standing there for a while. It appeared that the young man had first crawled through the micanthus, then he'd lurched from the field up the men's hill where he'd bumped into the Twilight Man, told him he had to go and sleep under a tree. But he hanged himself with his belt.

He never attained the summit of supreme bliss; he walked another road.

Three days later Wang Lun caught up with them.

Ma No had wavered: should he tell Wang himself about the change in his flock. Then he sent five men as messengers to report all they knew to Wang, believed to be a day and a half's journey away. He went into conclave with some elders, and listened carefully to them. But Ma No couldn't bring them round to the notion that Wang might repudiate this change in their precious teachings. The sanctity and robustness of the new ideas had rapidly permeated them; it'd only take a bit of discussing, they said, to persuade Wang and with him to convert the other scattered bands of Truly Powerless. The influence of Wang, though none of them had ever seen him, was so strong they were incapable of conceiving opposition to him. They would have thought their lives forfeit if they started something against him. Ma No said something about their role as leaders among the Broken Melon; he spoke so falteringly they couldn't work out what he was leading to; he failed to win them over.

Wang Lun had no need of messengers: rumours had reached him before this. He came back with them to Ma's camp. When he was led in the dark by lantern bearers to Ma's hut, he indicated with a movement of his hand that the woman squatting on the mat beside the former P'ut'o priest should leave. But Ma took the sister by the hand, led her to the next hut, came back alone.

A tiny oil lamp burned on the floor; near the right wall of the barely manhigh room a straw sack rustled on the mossy floor, beside it rags, cloths, clothing. By the left wall Ma's cart lay tipped on its side; balanced precariously on it, caught by a few reflected gleams, the golden Buddhas. The thousand-armed Kuan-yin of rock crystal leant its head against the wall, rested its pale, scratched face on a splintered bamboo post.

When Ma returned, Wang Lun was sitting quietly on the edge of the cart, gazing into the light. To his alarm the priest saw that Wang was carrying an enormous battle sword, holding it out before him with both hands. Wang Lun was altered, his gaze unblinking. He rubbed his knee, and when he stood up later Ma saw that he limped in his left leg.

The man from Hunkang-ts'un growled that he'd been spotted the other side of the Hut'o River by soldiers on exercise and recognized, he'd had to swim across the river and smashed his knee as he jumped over the rocks on the bank. This was not quite correct; though he had indeed skinned his knee during this chase, he sustained the main injury as he approached the region of the swamp. He had met followers of Ma's with some girls on the road; none of them recognized him. When they struck up a conversation, he learned for the first time that the members of this band called themselves Broken Melons; he pursued the conversation, with a dull excitement, grabbed hold of one as they turned away in distress, chased off the girls. Hearing cries for help a peasant left his grubbing in a bamboo thicket, threw a lump of root right across the road at Wang, almost smashed his already injured knee. Then the peasant fled as well, thinking when he caught sight of the sword that he'd wounded an Imperial soldier. Wang wore a blue tunic with red facing, given to him by a deserter from Ngo's troop.

Wang, sitting motionless on the cart, asked Ma No if they were suffering much harrassment by soldiers. As thick black drops of blood oozed through Wang's trousers Ma wanted to bring water and a styptic powder, but Wang warned him off with a shake of the head. When he spoke again, he said it mattered little to the brothers and sisters where oppression came from: from Taot'ais or somewhere else. But what did Ma No think? Fate was hard and couldn't be turned aside. It was good to teach the brothers that they shouldn't touch the world in its course; but that didn't mean you could play fate yourself and leave other people and the brothers and sisters to carry the burden. Those who thought they could stay untouched even then were likely to stumble into serious error. Yes, they would certainly and inevitably stumble into an error that would cost them more than a drop of blood.

Ma No, squatting on the mat, listened to him without looking up. He saw before him the hulking peasant who'd climbed one winter's day on the Nank'ou Pass up the little paths to his hut under the rocks; he begged and wouldn't go away from his door, asked about

the golden Fos on the shelf.

He was filled with an ardent love for Wang, wanted to yield to an emotion that under Wang's coarse, familiar Shantung dialect exhaled an "At last!"; but he remained still, thought, and wasn't even surprised that he was thinking.

How I've changed, thought Ma No. The mountains and valleys of the Eighteen Provinces are broad and stretch far and wide; I carry the key to the Western Paradise; Wang Lun and I must go our separate ways in peace.

He said Wang Lun had been gone a long time. The protection of the White Waterlily was important, but leading the brothers and sisters was more important, perhaps harder too. Wang Lun shouldn't be bitter; it was easy enough to set up rules, and in great quantities. As it turned out the rules of the Nank'ou mountains, however precious, weren't suited to all eventualities; they'd had to be changed. Wang Lun could rest assured that basically everyone was the same as if they were coming around the cliff of Shen-yi at that very moment. Wang Lun was really a perfected saint; he shouldn't break out in anger over them.

Ma No couldn't understand what drove him to torment Wang and call him a saint. He couldn't hide from himself that he crushed the expression on his tongue like a sweet date and tasted it with cold pleasure.

Wang stood up in pain, poked with his sword in the moss. He would never have believed it, not this. This man seemed to be casting the first die.

He slid painfully down onto the mat beside Ma; unwillingly let him roll up the trouser leg. The priest fetched a jug and linen, washed the knee.

Wang watched him. "Ma, once on Nank'ou Pass we sat next to each other. Was that really us, you and me? You lived up above the little stamping mills. Didn't we become friends?"

"We've gone out into the fields and woods of Chihli, Wang. Thousands have come to us from the towns, from every prefecture and district to taste our freedom and our true emancipation. We've

had to open prisons with cunning, bribes and deceit to free brothers of ours. None of them would have come and we'd have toiled in vain if we'd simply built another prison out of old stale words, dried-up rules. That wasn't your intention. And even if it was, it wouldn't have stayed so, if you'd come with us down from Nank'ou here to the swamp of Talu."

Wang reached for Ma No's chin.

"Ma No, who do you say would have changed his intention if he'd wandered with you, your southtrending band, from Nank'ou to the swamp of Talu? Whose intentions have changed? How many are they, and how good? Ma, there are two kinds of people. One kind live and don't know what they should do. The other kind know what they should do. We're that kind, we who've no right to live, who are here for the others, yes, Ma No, even at the cost of missing out on the highest chi. Everyone's predestined to his office. What our destiny is we knew in your hut up above the little stamping mills. You didn't need to tramp through Chihli and I didn't need to come with you to learn that. You shouldn't eat your bean broth and throw yourself at a woman and chase after the Western Paradise. I thought you knew that. All that's forbidden to us. Something else has been given to us: to know all this. But I won't become angry, Ma No my brother."

"You won't become angry, Wang."

"Do you know why I won't become angry? A while ago, before I came into your valley, I was walking across a field of thyme. I wasn't feeling very well, your messengers had gone on ahead, my knee hurt, I couldn't keep up. I sat down for a moment on a molehill. What was coming, our talk, our reunion, troubled me a little. It seemed to me for a moment I'd fallen victim to a field shade that was lying in wait for me there. When I open my eyes again I see a thick thread of light winding with lots of twists and turns across the field. It started right by my molehill, a little glimmer, low down, moving all the time. It was fireflies. Nature's not against us. I'm going to watch out tonight to see if the King of the Fireflies appears to me in a dream, and I shall thank him. They may have

been helpful spirits from the swamp, who saw how weak I was; they're so poor themselves. The glimmer led into your valley. I'm not angry; I haven't been abandoned."

"Wang, you shan't turn against me. A few weeks ago I thought just like you: they the grains, we the shovel; they the head, we the cap; they the foot, we the path. Then things came that I find it hard to remember: that the hat, you might say, took control of the head, and the road fled from the foot. I know I owe you a reckoning for it, I don't deny there's a reckoning due. But I'm unable to give you one, because I cannot, even with an effort, cannot call it to mind. It's been erased, like inkmarks in the rain."

"Bad ink," Wang interrupted; he was smiling. "And what is the rain called, dear brother?"

"Not disloyal."

"The rain is called vanity and lust for power; vanity and lust for power I call it."

As they squatted there side by side, Wang held Ma No by the shoulders, doubtfully studied his gaunt face. For the first time they looked squarely at each other. Wang seemed to grow sadder and more serious; he let his head droop crookedly, in a surge of sympathy took Ma's hand and stroked it: "What is the rain called, Ma No? What happened to you?"

"You were gone so long. We lived as Truly Powerless. Women came. I don't know what happened to the other brothers. One day I just knew that I was—no longer—free of desire. But I wanted to be again. Life's so short. You can't walk down the wrong road too long, you can't spend days like copper cash and exchange them for rice and millet. Now once again I'm free of desire, I've been sated, must go on and on being sated. I know, you don't need to tell me, it's endless: but I can pray freely and purely and hope that my actions weigh enough to balance the lust. Don't scold, Wang. I know that no one despises me."

"It was the women. Brother Ma No, I don't despise you for that. But you hadn't finished; I think you had more to say. You ran to the woman you hungered for. Did you take her then and go your own

way, back to Nank'ou or some village or town? No one's forced to come to us. Anyone can go if he feels pressed. Tell me now, is that what you did?"

Ma No, listening with half an ear, continued ruminatively: "I've known for a long time what desires are. But what women are I didn't know at all. Women, women. You aren't like me, Wang, schooled from infancy in the monastery. Sighing, not knowing what for. Casting about in the moonlight in a great restlessness, and finally sighing for—Kuan-yin; worrying over the—twenty holy commandments. That's how you forget yourself. Now the women are here. I believe they've sometimes wound themselves about me from morning till night, crying, begging me for marvellous formulas. Until I'd calmed them and they knew our way, weeks passed, and then new ones arrived. At last they followed my good way. They left a pressure on my shoulder, a gasping squeezed-up heart, sweat on my hands. I went their way. Stronger men are needed for this work, P'ut'o-shan has spoiled me. See there, beside us on the cart, just look at them! Are they still there? This rattletrap's resting now from twenty years of wandering, the Gods weigh on its sleep."

Ma No, not rising, grabbed the handle of the cart, gave it a jerk. The golden Buddhas swayed, fell to the ground on either side, tumbled over each other. Lastly with an abrupt sound the Kuanyin of rock crystal overturned. Striking hard against a broken-off Buddha's head she cracked in two halves; her arms shattered.

Wang sought Ma No's face. But he was hunched over, and spoke as if nothing had happened.

"Although it was like that with me, I didn't want to, couldn't desert you. There's no sense punishing me, no, banishing me for eternity, because I was so badly brought up. There must be an end to it. The holy books must be wrong. There must be a solution. I knew the solution. The doctrine of chastity is a nonsense, not a precious rule, a barbarism. The brothers and sisters agreed with me."

Wang twitched. He flung himself half round to the wall so that Ma could not make out his face in the shadows. His gigantic battle sword lay across his knee; the thin bandage was soaked with

crimson blood.

The sword had been given him by Ch'en Yao-fen on his departure from Poshan. It was called Yellow Leaper. It was an heirloom of the Ch'en family, and invited its possessor to ponder the traditions of the White Waterlily.

A straight double-edged blade, inlaid on its upper side with seven round panels of brass; close to the haft, below a star pattern, lotus leaves. The gilded grip swelling towards the middle; on either side the characters for the Ming: sun and moon in fine silver wire; the guard moonshaped. The pommel ending handsomely in a tonguing dragon's head.

Wang did not say what drove him after a silence to stand up and, pushing away the sword, to press outstretched arms hard and mercilessly like logs onto Ma No's shoulders and hold him in a pincer. Wang's teeth chattered, a convulsive trembling took his hands that sought the sword pommel in order to drive the blade between Ma No's lips into his tight clenched mouth, turn it swiftly in his gullet, bore with it, pull it out and strike at his leathery cheeks.

Ma No sank down under the pressure. He waited sullenly for what would happen next. In an evil, venomous mood he stayed sitting when Wang withdrew his arms and with a groan stretched his injured knee.

Wang intercepted the baleful look Ma cast up at him. His face swelled like sprung upholstery. He raised himself painfully leaning on his sword, his bloodshot eyes flared. He pointed with both hands down at Ma: "You, you're the traitor, you're a deceiver, a seducer, just don't move, that word says it all, no need for longer explanations. I'd have said the same to you three days ago, when I heard about the setup here. You didn't have to go looking for a solution with your miserable pining; I could have told you straight away you'd betray the whole world, every paradise and every blessing just to lie in the straw with your woman. Because you're poisonous, a natural scorpion. It's my fault, mine alone, for giving you free rein with the Truly Powerless. I am the pillar on which everyone rests, I am the sky that spreads impenetrable over the

wretched and itself enjoys nothing of the sun and all the stars. I've turned away from more than you know of, Ma No, from more than a woman and a thousand women; I've had to part from myself, from my arms, my legs, from my birth and my history, I've dug among the intestines in my own belly and drained the blood from my veins. With violence I've done that.

"I shall never reach the Blessed Isles, the chi-plant can bloom where it will, what I've gone through is past now, can never come again. Brave Su-ko died unburied. Homeless spirits must shun me, for I myself am empty, a withered leaf, a paper dragon brightly painted with a whistle in its mouth, like the ones they fly in southern parts at the head of a funeral procession. It's so bad I frighten even myself; when I'm left in peace to sit quietly on a stone I think I'm a flitting kuei, seeking a man's fresh corpse.

"But you, Ma No, you're different. Good for you. Hope flashes from your eyes, and in your entrails satisfaction sits. You're smaller than me, needier than me, drier than me, but you prance before me with your life.

"I came across you two days ago, Ma No. Admit it, it was you, wasn't it, it was you! By a pond, between two willow trees. You were the crane that wouldn't leave me, that strutted up and down in front of me on proud legs, on scarlet legs, and speared frogs.

You wore white, and looked craftily out of yellow eyes in your blood red head. And then after you'd eaten there in front of me and I'd left you in peace, you flew up into the air and voided your black clung onto my tunic and my shoes.

"You wicked shade, you kuei, you shan't annihilate me, I say. You shan't, I tell you! The kuei must get past me first."

Wang, his damaged knee drawn up, brandished the sword. He spoke in a harsh whisper, with abhorrence, into the cowering priest's upturned birdface. With blind relish he threw every sentence over the priest like a handful of crushed peppers. Behind the words an iron fury sounded.

Ma No's hatred for this man swelled immeasurably. Now and then he pursed his mouth scornfully, gathered himself for a desperate

leap, fell gloomily back, steeled himself, not stirring, determined not to stir from the spot.

"If my brother Wang meets the King of the Fireflies in his dreams tonight, he'll have no cause to thank him. A wise old man from Han times taught that a path trodden in anger will be of no avail. My brother Wang wears a battle sword at his side. He declares he must wear a sword and is unable to approach the holy Tao. My brother should observe my miserable calm, how I prefer to be struck than strike. His sword seems to me like a possessed soul that leads its master into a swamp. As always, Ma No from P'ut'o-shan will never raise a sword, and no one can ever persuade him to do so. He's too weak for the frenzied spirit of a sword. Ma No follows the Tao as if he were just now coming around the cliff of Shen-yi, as if he were just now hearing for the first time the words of a man who spoke like Boddhisatva, the words of Wang Lun: 'A frog can't devour a stork. Against fate there is only one remedy: Not to struggle, to be as weak and docile as the white water. We shall climb a peak more beautiful than any I have yet seen, the Peak of Supreme Bliss.'

"Ma No's climbing straight up to this peak. And since Ma No is not without lust after women, he's climbing with the women. But he must attain the peak, will attain it. You can turn aside from me, Wang Lun; but women are sweet to me, my eye lingers on them as on the colours of orchids, I've never prayed so purely as I have since one of them lay beside me on this bag of straw. No trance on P'ut'o-shan such as I saw and I lived through, no ecstasy has ever been so full of power as mine since that profane moment. The thirst in my mouth is no more wicked than the lust of my hands and my loins. Sakyamuni was wrong. Of that I'm certain. If up on Nank'ou I told you otherwise of the golden Buddhas and you accepted it, then I taught you bad things, and it's only right they should rebound on me, though they shan't mislead me, Wang Lun. We're no longer taking the same road, Wang Lun. Don't torment yourself and don't torment me."

Wang Lun sat in stony calm on the cart. The long battle sword lay in the moss on broken Buddha-heads. It was clear to Wang what

must happen; it was clear to Ma No. They said nothing more about it.

He asked Ma No to have cold water brought for his knee and to summon a doctor in the morning. Ma and two men dragged bundles of grass into the hut. Before they lay down to sleep, they gazed gravely at each other and bowed. They stood side by side. Then they threw themselves down.

Wang stayed four days among the Broken Melon, who were mobilizing for a trek farther southwards. He observed them, got to know the majority of these adherents. He did not argue with them, spoke tersely, his manner very distracted, of the hard road of the Truly Powerless. When they asked him why a man who, like them, wanted to bow unresisting to fate should wear a soldier's jacket and carry a battle sword, he answered smiling that lots of people put masks on to frighten away evil. On the day of Ch'ü Yuan, the fifth day of the fifth month, the five venomous creatures rampage: serpent, scorpion, centipede, toad and lizard; on that day anxious mothers rub flowers of sulphur in wine onto their children's ears and noses and paint the character for "tiger" on their foreheads; but they don't mean their children are wild tigers.

Between the day when he left the Naok'ou mountains in a snowstorm and this summer month, a transformation had taken place within him. Ma No had noticed as they sat in the storeroom in Pat'a-ling how a feeling of pity for these brothers who trusted him settled on Wang. He made his eventful journey through Chihli and Shantung. The more he suffered, the farther he was driven from the role of a gentle Truly Powerless preparing a cloak of purity for his soul. His attitude hardened to that of protector of his brothers. He must fight for the outcasts of his native land.

Close by Chinan-fu temptation accosted him. He couldn't resist the compulsion that sank painfully, joyously into his breast; made, face smeared with charcoal, for the high road that leads to Chinan-fu from the east. Strode on alone for a while, waited for a wagon train

that he could use to smuggle himself into the city. None came at this time of day, for the oil carts, trains of wagons bearing fruit, vegetables and coal usually entered Chinan-fu in the earliest hours of morning. Before Wang, strangely reckless, had quite reached the eastern gate of the city he was spotted by two constables, who recognized his tall figure and rolling gait, followed him and together with a gatekeeper seized him as he was about to saunter through the East Gate, slowly and unconcerned, just like a citizen of Chinan-fu.

Through the barred window, as big as his hand, of the cellar into which they threw him Wang could see the broad winding street, its shops, shouting hawkers and colourful bustle, once the stamping ground for his games, tricks, and swindles. On the left must be the market to which the street with the temple of the great Patron of Music, Han Hsiang-tzu, led. Straight ahead was the way to the inn, to Su-ko's house, now a heap of ashes. Then the training ground of the provincial troops.

And now temptation fell on Wang: to remain here, to await trial, endure the sentence of death by a thousand cuts. He couldn't account for the fervent longing that ambushed him. He wanted to die surrounded by this bustling and haggling, among the clappers and gongs and the shouts of hawkers, here on his home ground. In the cellar he pondered his changed situation. How months ago he'd left his companions in the Nank'ou mountains, how barely two weeks before he'd dined at Ch'en Yao-fen's sumptuous table, and how the T'ouszu lost his life, and Su-ko, and how he'd cheated, raged and robbed. And it seemed to him all past bearing, and pleasant, a stroke of luck, to suffer greatly here, to suffer right to the bitter end.

In their haste to arrest him the constables and the gatekeeper had locked him up without taking away his sword. The three of them were delighted to have this notorious murderer in their cellar. The two constables were already in the yamen and hurrying to the town headquarters to inform the Taot'ai and the general of their extraordinary catch and make sure of their reward, before it occurred to the old gatekeeper on his bench that Wang had a sword with him. From his windowsill he took a little cudgel that a cattle

drover had left behind that morning, hid it in his sleeve and went barefoot down the steps. He'd steal Wang's sword; if it was valuable, sell it; otherwise produce it at the yamen and be rewarded for his bravery.

He opened the cellar padlock. Mice ran between his bare chilblained feet, scampered up his trouserlegs. Wang sat on the floor and looked at the old man. The gatekeeper stepped closer, asked how he felt, was he ill, studied his expression. The sword lay where it had been thrown, away from Wang towards the door.

Wang thanked him; it was good to be in Chinan again. And how was the landlord of the inn and which market was now the most popular.

The landlord was doing very nicely—now the gatekeeper saw the sword, edged Sidelong towards it, felt with his hands backwards for the handle—and the Goldbeaters' Market, which used to be so much the favourite, had lost its floral gaiety ever since the guild of flower sellers declined to meet the high stall rents. They did all their trade nowadays in the spacious yard of their own guildhouse.

It was astonishing, said Wang, how quickly the town changed. But the gatekeepers stayed the same. They stole whatever came into their hands. Only he oughtn't to steal this sword, if he'd be so good as to refrain. For it belonged to a man in eastern Shantung, whose name he'd mention if his friend could keep a secret and take the sword back to him for a large consideration.

The gatekeeper fawned before the prisoner, whispered that he could be relied on. And if Wang wanted an honourable, albeit secret, burial in a tolerably propitious location, let him only say the word before the constables got back with the transport cage; he'd already helped lots like that.

From outside came loud complaints and scolding. Wang looked through the bars. A beggar beadle was laying into two paupers with his long staff. A mandarin with a blue button looked out from his palanquin and beckoned to the men, who had begged fraudulently at his house, away from their home patch, and twice in one day.

Wang sighed, squatted down again, said thoughtfully that after all

the town hadn't changed much. Shook himself resolutely, and then he went up to the gatekeeper and lifted him by the shoulders. When the old man struck him on the breast with the cudgel, Wang said it'd be best if he saved himself the trouble, laid the squawking man on his face, outside at the open door yelling into the town threatened the beggar beadle and the blue button with his whirling sword, disappeared from the walls of Chinan-fu.

There's no sense in dying. You can't just let it go on. The beadle's wrong, and the beggars are wrong. They've all turned aside from the Tao. Someone must make a start with the right way.

There followed a weary trek. Wang tried to reach the region south of the Nank'ou mountains by the most direct roads. But news of him was spreading.

Drives were organized to hunt him down, following an order from the Tsungtu of Shantung that the Prefect of any district through which Wang passed without being apprehended would be liable to severe punishment.

Pursued and only gradually aware of the danger he was in, particularly when he observed that the fame of the Truly Powerless had spread throughout Chihli and Shantung and everyone knew he wanted to join up with the brothers in the northwest, Wang abandoned his tactic of solitary wandering. He saw it his duty to press through at all costs to the northern plains. A superstitious feeling bound him to his sword; Yellow Leaper was his steed. There were two countries in the world: one the little plain south of Nank'ou, the other everywhere else, water through which he swam on Yellow Leaper's back.

Once when he had lain two days in a cave, afraid that if he ventured out he'd be captured by peasants who recognized him, he swore to himself: "Whatever happens outside the realm of my brothers is subject to its own, different, laws. I am poor and suffering only among them, I must go to them. I deny my laws to this land, these waves."

Took up close by the gates with a band of evil characters whose speciality was to put whole villages to the torch, kidnap hostages

and extort ransoms; who like the Chungus of Manchuria appeared everywhere in the summer, in winter scattered into the towns. The peculiar fate that ruled over this man of destiny arranged it so that at the very time he was taking command of a dangerous band and was pressing on with it from place to place, in western Chihli just such hordes were injecting the first fears into the sectarians' idyllic dreams.

For a month and a half he buried memories of icy winter days; through the sweetest spring weather he advanced from crime to crime. He felt no unease. When, three days' journey from a wood where the first groups of Truly Powerless were camping, the tearaways proposed an attack on a wealthy traveller, a scholarly Hutuktu who in grand style was making a tour of inspection of the lamaical monasteries of Chihli, Wang made up his mind to leave them.

He declined to take part in the enterprise. They surrounded him—it was early morning in a pretty little valley—took him to task, called him a coward. With unhurried movements he freed his back, explained that he'd catch up with his friends in three days, refused to take them along. They were waves; he wanted land. They began to mock the namby-pamby brothers, asked Wang where his begging bowl was, they had something to put in it, laughed.

Wang walked away. Two li farther on five of them barred his way, started jeering again, fidgetting the while suspiciously with their bows. When one of them pushed a severed queue into his greasy cap as a memento, Wang thought it right to gain the shore with one great bound.

He cursed the land he was leaving, spat on his sword as you spit on a corpse to waken it, raised it high with both hands, smashed it into the almsgiver's breast. When he let go, he found himself alone on the road with the dead man. He drew the edge between his lips; the land he was leaving spurted hot towards him; he licked the auspicious blood.

Ran for hours without resting, Yellow Leaper leading the way. Until evening came, and he laid himself down without hunger in a

wood. Two days passed during which frightened women who crossed the scarecrow's path handed over fruit and uncooked rice, then at onset of evening he skirted a meadow from where singing and the chanting of sutras floated towards him. He recognized beside a fire the young hunchback from Nank'ou. They were a large band.

The night before he left Ma No's troop, two girls came into his tent. They held yellow lanterns on bamboo staves which they shone on him, leaned the lanterns out of the way in a corner. They rolled the sleeping man off his pile of straw, rubbed his eyes for him, squatted alert side by side as he sat up, carefully exercised his injured knee and slowly began to smile.

He wore a long brown tunic, his coarse feet were bare. Each girl took one of his hands and raised him up, so that he took them both in his hands and supported himself on round submissive shoulders. Held thus, heads pressed together, they exchanged nervous glances. The younger in his left arm trembled and sought the other girl's fingers. They both thought the terrible sorcerer was going to carry them away through the tent roof, or twine like a snake around their necks.

But Wang released them, one after the other stroked smooth the straightcut fringes on their foreheads. They were entranced. The younger one shook herself and ground her teeth. They pinched his arms that he held out between them. They felt his muscles, right and left, pulled themselves up by his elbows, swung, the elder grabbing just in time at the neck of his tunic, the younger tottering unsteadily on her shoulders. Suddenly the younger one, wobbling on Wang's forearm, scratching and tapping at the skin on his breast, overbalanced, dragging the other girl down with her, bit his arm close to the wrist like a playful young puppy at a bone, slipped interestedly onto her feet and stood chewing and snapping at Wang's unmoving yellow-brown left arm. She looked sidelong into the man's face, waiting for him to twitch, astonished that he still didn't flinch. His hardness hurt her teeth. Exhausted she smacked her

lips, licked herself.

She was a native of Shensi, small, lithe, a chatterer. You could take her for a poodle or a rabbit. She told lies freely and happily, in a certain silly way, just as they came into her head. Along with the other girl she had been a house slave on the country estate of a family near Kuangp'ing, fled when her carelessness caused a fire in her mistress' room, didn't dare return, cheerfully let three begging sisters bring her along to the camp of the Broken Melon. She was lazy, said yes to everyone, was impervious to teaching.

The other, no bigger than her but fuller, with a longer nose, much more delicate than the younger girl, was no less a liar but in more of a swaggering, boastful way. She inclined easily to sentimentality and self-worship. Ever since her twelfth year she'd suffered occasional spells of strange humour that lasted months, gave herself up to romantic imaginings and thoughts of suicide. Later she liked to assume the expression of a blessed martyr, as if she'd had some tremendous experience, but when anyone pressed her admitted lightly that homeless, orphaned and bereft of family as she was she found the emptiness and hopelessness of her existence an absolute torment. She considered herself special, clung intimately, even passionately, to her girlfriends, got on with them only for a matter of weeks, was considered clever, pretty and quarrelsome. Had she come into the house, not of an honourable gentleman but of a sharp man of business, she would have been sold long before into a theatrical troupe, where she could have developed her gifts to the best advantage.

Wang slipped into trousers and sandals. The girls wanted to help. They fussed chattering around him. The younger offered herself to him in excitement as she explained through a welter of questions that she was over fifteen and was glad to come across such a fearsome conqueror of demons. Oh, she was so looking forward to plucking flowers with him. Wang said he'd have to think about it, pushed them away one after the other as they danced around him. The younger one ripped her gown at the neck and under the shoulder. Pleased and bashful, she showed Wang the meagre

roundness of her breasts. The sentimental girl stood pouting because the little one kept nudging her with her shoulder, told her to go away, hit her from behind over the nose.

When Wang grasped the little one by the shoulders, sent her spinning over the mossy ground so the girl became dizzy and lurching crazily split open her too tight trousers, the sentimental one scolded her: she didn't learn that in the old master's respectable house. Wang took her by the shoulder too. But she pulled herself free, said with downcast shining eyes that she'd like to make a proposition. She'd wrestle with the little one, or lift stones, or whatever the little one wanted. They should see which was best. The man set them on each other, then sat down in the straw. They had to crouch down beside him, he comforted them, stroked their glowing faces that they averted bitterly from one another.

He told as he petted them stories that he'd heard in Chinan-fu.

The ovenblack masses of the night loosened. A thin grey gas disjointed them and dispersed, dissipated them in space. The catalpa forest, uncovered, stepped forward like a ram with lowered horns.

Wang put on his blue smock, hung the sword around his neck. They'd better run, fetch their begging bowls and stuff; they must leave the camp together. As he walked slowly beside them, sparing his knee, he didn't say why he had to leave so stealthily or where they were going.

He wandered for three weeks through central Chihli, sent emissaries into many of the larger settlements and towns, which had already received news from Shantung that the Wu-wei under Wang Lun from Hunkang-ts'un belonged to those friends of the motherland the White Waterlily, and should be supported by every conceivable secret means. Wang's emissaries went as fig sellers; in their long narrow box between layers of figs lay the sword, Yellow Leaper, Ch'en Yao-fen's heirloom, with a letter from Wang in the prearranged cipher of the White Waterlily whereby, starting with a character to be communicated only by mouth, only the third and then the seventh word were to be read, then from another specified character every second and fourth word. The secret aid of the White

Waterlily was quickly mobilized; there was complete trust in the committee in Shantung.

At the same time Wang amended his rules governing the way the brothers and sisters lived; in the poorer districts he tolerated and desired the complete dissolution and dispersal of the brothers and sisters in settlements, villages, towns. In this Wang was yielding to the wishes of two members of the Pailien-chiao, who told him they did not favour the strict isolation of the Truly Powerless, their owl existence; an alliance needed more than a letter; actually there wasn't any sword under the sweetness of the figs. But Wang gave secret instructions to the precentors of every group to warn the brothers and sisters before they entered human society that they were the equals of the brothers of the White Waterlily. Patriots they all were, but only the Wu-wei in peace and toleration, truest children of their poor race that none could truly entangle in a war, since it flowed forever like water and assumed the form of every vessel.

After these efforts to secure the safety of the brothers and sisters in central Chihli, Wang Lun should have been able to retire and devote himself to his own preparations for the great heavenly voyage. But a horse cannot graze with an arrow in its shank, and a wind that rushes against a flagpole cannot be silent. There were evenings for Wang that summer when, sitting in a forsaken teahouse, on a woodland path, he was ambushed by thoughts of Ma No and laid low by them. One day he conquered his feelings and sent a messenger, a swift young man, with a letter for Ma No, in which he asked him to forget their meeting and to deliver up to him the souls that were now befuddled, and to come himself with them. Not even the messenger returned.

It happened as Ma No said: there had never been among the brothers and sisters a devotion more intense, feelings more tender, a sweeter sense of life than since that morning when they confessed themselves out loud to be Broken Melons. A few months later none

of them lingered this side of existence; wherever they had passed they left a soft buzz of talk: that theirs had been the greatest happiness.

Even before the Broken Melon reached the foothills of the T'aihang-shan, north of Shunte, a robber band fell on the endless column of brothers and sisters. They were straggling one rainy afternoon through a monotonous loess landscape. There was a baggage train of carts, wide wagons. The armed ruffians, eighty of them, fell on these, thinking to make a haul. When they found only boards, beans, a little rice and water together with a considerable number of invalids they overturned the wagons, polluted the water barrels, took the sacks of provisions. Most of the brothers in the rearguard fled; six braver ones, wanting to carry away the invalids, were driven off with kicks and with blows from the flat of sword blades. One who tried to remonstrate with the criminals had his tongue cut out and tied to his forehead, to general laughter. The robbers, who now realized who they were dealing with, had great fun chasing after some of the sisters. Under the rousing chorus of a pious hymn that a sister struck up in her deadly terror when they threw her to the ground, they made off with eleven tighttrussed disrobed girls.

The sectarians meanwhile crowded round Ma No and the elders at the front of the column. A massing of confused cries, of clueless grimaces, knocking knees. They tried to surround the leaders from behind and bring them to a stop. The leaders slipped free, forcibly knocked away arms that stretched out to them, shook their heads, pressed on, shrugged hands from their shoulders and backs.

What did the brothers and sisters want. Didn't they know the precious teaching of their sect? To be unresisting. Didn't they know that?

Only now did the frightfulness, the terrible solitude of their doctrine swoop down upon the chalkwhite men. They flapped round one another, dragged tormented eyes from the rear of the column, forced their feet into Ma No's tracks. Writhing under the screams they skirled a cracked song meant for their ears alone. They called

on secret spirits, consoled each other.

Ma No walked slowly with the elders in the dripping rain. The elders wrung their hands whispering, glanced at each other, stood wishing the earth would swallow them. Ma's eyes opened wide; an outburst of tense fury. Why hadn't they seized daggers and knives? The difference between this suffering and any other, come, what was it? How was it different? Yes, you had to force yourself to see this as good, as very good, to worship it, for this was fate. Exactly. Fate.

And he forced them and himself to turn around, watch there over the loess landscape the depredations of the robbers on the brothers and sisters and swallow this poison. He silenced the brothers' brazen stupid singing. They threw themselves to the wet ground, were hacked to pieces by what they heard. The sectarians flocked about the grimly kneeling, agonizing leaders.

Breathless calm. Open stage. Screams from the trussed-up sisters, stripping of tender bodies, clubs ringing on the skulls of brothers, roaring, trampling horses, timid whimpering of the sick, empty plain, rain.

Everything agglomerated round the wreckage of the wagons. When the drenched invalids began to yammer the brothers couldn't look them in the face. When the tongueless man rasped and gaped his bloody mouth they turned their backs.

At discussion near a market town that evening Ma No was unshaken. No one said much. They separated groaning, expressions paintight. Dull seething unease among the brothers and sisters.

Fifty brothers came together in the night, searched through the market town for the robbers. They learned that the robbers had their lair in a village some distance back from the town, that neither authorities nor private citizens had been able to dislodge them. Some locals also brought news that three of the abducted girls had been carried off right away to Shunte; eight were being held in the village.

That night the brothers burst into the houses pointed out to them in the village, fought with the robbers, who assumed it was a

military raid and made haste to escape. The sisters were found and freed, two criminals and three brothers lay dead in the moonlit village street.

The brothers grew so bold now that next day they sniffed out the whereabouts in the town of the other girls, who were lodged in an obscure house of pleasure. At evening they visited the place in groups of three and five, enjoyed themselves until the third night watch, then without difficulty broke down the doors, lay low for a whole day among the beggars of the town, a week later by roundabout means gained Ma No's camp on the flowery slopes of the T'aihang.

Ma No, alerted to these events, considered expelling them. A majority of the sectarians had already reverted to the notion that Wu-wei was the core and the salvation, must remain core and salvation. The liberators hung their heads. Where sorrow appeared genuine Ma forgave. Five who had been unwise enough to boast were turned away.

A bitter secret struggle developed between Ma No and his antagonists in the league. Ma's victory, which soon became apparent, demonstrated the enormous power at the disposal of this utterly changed man.

In the fertile populous region at the foot of the T'aihang holy prostitution emerged from the bosom of the league.

Ever since their sojourn by the swamp of Talu the sisters had acquired the habit, whenever men approached as they wandered in lonely regions, mountain paths, woods, of going up to them and exchanging friendly words; even caresses were hard to slip away from without risk. After the attack near the T'aihang-shan this practice became general.

The sisters mobilized to erect a dike of gentleness around the Broken Melon. They no longer went about in ragged beggar's traps; sought with help from the brothers to acquire bright clothing, lovely painted parasols, fine combs. They congregated every day at evening, and the more experienced taught them seductive love songs from the pleasure houses, how to strum the p'ip'a. They no longer hurried anxiously past labourers repairing the Imperial highway, peanut gleaners grubbing in the fields; they fought with feminine weapons, glided past. Among the almost five hundred women there were ten who saw the situation of Ma No's group clearly, who joined their destiny to that of the Broken Melon, brought intelligence and determination to the strengthening of the league. It was the younger beauties who established holy prostitution. No one, they said, should hinder them in smoothing a path to the Western Paradise, now that they shared everything, everything with everyone.

Something distasteful happened in the T'aihang-shan, something magical, ingenuous as in a song. The beggar camp was struck, the men went into the mountains where settlement clustered by settlement. The girls tripped arm in arm across the chequerboard of fields. They separated along the narrow paths between fields of rice and wheat. Soft muddy ground dented under the light feet of the joybringers. Amid the green of stalks a vivid red shone out, upright spherical flowers on childhigh stalks, shimmering silky purple: poppies. The girls' fringes stuck to low foreheads. At their bright girdles they carried an alms bowl. Here and there one of them, not used to walking, brandished a brasshung stick, a rattlestick.

When a bringer of joy met a labouring woman or girl, the painted beggar girl would greet her, give her own name, say she belonged to the league of the Broken Melon, tell stories, pitch in, on leaving present a little cloth bag with ashes or a paper amulet with characters.

A labourer asked her about the district, about the direction of the ground's spiritual pulse; she accepted presents from the respectful man, sat with him on a fieldbank, under a pagoda tree, ate what he gave her, and while he gazed at her entranced told him of the pious miracle workers who were her companions, of the difficult fate they'd endured. And then she tripped away, turning frequently and bowing greetings. When the holy prostitute saw trembling nervous glances at her side she was consoling, sat apart from him and sang a few strange little songs. She aired the neck of her loose gown, pulled out a red cloth, wound it around her face. Behind the cloth her laugh rang out, and then she granted the lucky man his will. Took the path again until she disappeared from the district.

Reports of this new league sped swiftly through the towns, the pleasure quarters, theatres, teahouses. Slaves of both sexes, actor lads and painted women slipped away. In vain proprietors appealed with one voice to the authorities, withheld licence fees to exert pressure.

On all lips was the story of young lady Ch'ai from Ch'ienling and how she escaped. She'd been sold very young to a house of low repute.

When she had reached the position of catering manageress within the house and as a result of her incessant enjoyment of hot wine—wine spiced with aphrodisiac ingredients—had fallen prey to chronic stomach pains, she considered one sober moment whether it mightn't be better to hunger and freeze than be constantly sick, beaten by the proprietress and perform transactions of love with coolies, oil sellers, boat haulers.

Abused in every way, feeling herself completely ruined, she jumped from her uncurtained sedan chair, whose bearers she had liberally bribed, into the magistrate's yamen where she was at once

detained and taken, after the sentencing of her vicious mistress, to the House of Salvation which the town maintained next to the prison. She learned useful things in the course of her short weeks there; her picture was hung in a glass case at the entrance to the house for men who came looking for a wife.

As soon as her picture was hung up someone went to report to the chastised mistress, still recovering from a hundred strokes of the bamboo. She engaged a nephew of hers, a layabout that she supported, to present himself to the director of the municipal House of Salvation, hand over false references as to his character and request the girl for his wife. After the fellow had hypocritically assured himself of the good qualities of his future bride he declared for her, fetched her away for a couple of weeks to a rented lodging and then took her back to his aunt.

The unlucky girl racked her brains how to inform the police of this deception. She was constantly watched, every bit of money was taken from her, she was locked up, beaten daily by the woman until she yielded and promised to behave. The ruinous drinking began again, the girl went about with bloodshot eyes, completely subdued, bowing low whenever she saw the mistress, glad that her hands and the soles of her feet were being left to heal.

Then one day a newly arrived inmate of the house who had no relish for this kind of life told her she'd got to know a melonseed seller who loved her and wanted to help her. The tormented girl was half unwillingly persuaded; together with three other girls that they brought into their confidence they set out a long petition of complaint against the mistress and her nephew. The new girl undertook to pass the petition to her admirer; he was to submit it by the usual channel to the authorities. The melonseed seller did in fact deliver the letter to the proper place; but before officials could come to investigate the affair, the nephew, via a minor functionary of the yamen who had charge of the correspondence, got wind of the complaint.

One evening the frightened girls listened through the floorboards to his agitated debate with the mistress in the reception lounge

below on the measures that had to be taken. Then the five compromised imperilled creatures steeled themselves to an act of violence: they tied up the woman who watched their room from the corridor, having first stopped her mouth with paper; let themselves down, by means of false queues and their own which they quickly cut off and knotted together, at the back wall of the house, ran pellmell through the streets, hid until morning under the town wall; after exchanging their elegant costumes for the rags of beggar women who passed the night in covered burrows by the wall, slipped one after the other through the gate and away.

They had no need to hurry so, for after the first shock the mistress and her nephew were glad the five complainants had disappeared, and sent many a good riddance after them. But deathly fear goaded the flanks of the five girls; they ran mindlessly li after li, at every sound from behind threw themselves flat on the ground. Finally, having clambered up a mountain and sat down on an untrodden waste of stones, they wept themselves calm together.

Further developments in this very commonplace affair lacked for nothing in banality. At the end of the first day two of the girls, unable to continue for excitement, hunger and fear, separated from the rest and stayed behind for several days at the magistracy of a village to which they came, waiting for the alerted mistress to fetch them. But she accused the girls of theft and slander. The benignly disposed magistrate reproached them with this for a few more days in the village and advised them, since they had in fact misappropriated some clothing, to give up all thought of a return to town. And so the spoilt young things worked for scanty wages in the fields and sties, cursed the whole business.

The other three girls caught up with Ma No's band, after five days of uninterrupted wandering, freezing and thirst that left them almost dead from exhaustion. They were welcomed with open arms. But two of them couldn't take to the strict quiet life. Their talents and their beauty weren't sufficiently noticed. The mentality of the brothers and sisters struck them as boring and comical. One of them married a brother who felt the same way. The other, a clever young

thing, studied a few of the favourite Court dances from an absconded Imperial actor, mugged up phrases and Court arcana from him and was soon engaged as an important acquisition by the proprietor of a teahouse with cabaret. To promote his find, he started rumours circulating about intrigues at the Imperial Court of which she was the victim, and so on.

Only the destitute, the tormented who had let themselves be carried along barely knowing their own mind bloomed among the Broken Melon. They'd never dreamt such happiness was possible. For the first time something like hope gleamed again from sunken eyes. But they were the least fitted to such a life. A stray Shih, as the knowledgeable among the sectarians put it, had pierced their skin and entrails. They vomited blood and could go no farther. A village apothecary concocted rejuvenating pills for them from the placenta of a primigravid bitch. But they lay dead in the lovely summer fields and were free of their wretched existence.

The fame of the holy prostitutes spread far across the countryside. Perhaps nothing served so well to make the sect known. The authorities and the harrassing literati in the Confucius temples, though under no inhibitions, could come to no agreement on measures to adopt. They couldn't permit many hundreds, among them depraved scions of the oldest families, to be massacred by constables and provincial troops; none dared risk the spectacle of a slaughter of madmen who wouldn't lift a finger to defend themselves.

Efforts were made through mildness and gentle force to move the sectarians on, to scatter them. As every attempt met with a flat refusal, the Prefects banned every village and settlement which the sectarians approached from supplying them with food and drink. Individual Prefects, on their own initiative and with the support of their officials, initiated action against the league. They made use of popular superstition, spread rumours that the sectarians abducted pretty women from lonely villages, that they had in their possession a life-prolonging powder which they kept for themselves. On the basis of such rumours minor assaults ensued on sectarians who were

found some distance from the camp. They were stripped naked, beaten. The secret instigators of such attacks hoped this would reduce the flow of adherents to the league and put fear into the sectarians. The calm of the Broken Melon was undiminished, unchanged the suggestive power of the Western Paradise that was promised to all who followed the Tao, free from unease and troubled by no desires. Only they knew the true pure Tao, and they would attain mastery of the powers sung of in the ancient odes.

Since such attacks on the league enjoyed little success the Prefects stood aside from the affair, submitted reports to the provincial authorities, waited.

Jealous fomentation in the Confucius temples. Literati, former government officers, the half-pensioned, their friends, every official in western Chihli saw the Broken Melon as a personal enemy, to be fought all the more vigorously since the hands of the government were plainly tied. Here the only worry was of the impression a massacre would make on the populace, otherwise everything would have been settled long since.

Until one day an old military man in Shunte of the rank of T'itu, who detested religious quarrels and wanted to ingratiate himself with Peking, offered to take on the job of annihilating the Broken Melon if a substantial sum of money were placed at his disposal for the recruitment of a number of former soldiers, true patriots. The sum being quickly collected by subscription amongst the relieved conspirators, two hundred men set off one night from Shunte aiming by a forced march to reach the sectarians while it was still dark, before they left their camp; the T'itu was among them. Thus occurred early in the morning the notorious bloodbath at a village next to the camp of the Broken Melon.

Rumours of the approach of an armed band had alarmed the inhabitants of this region for some days already; they doubted the possibility of action against these harmless people. Still, the emergence of the league and holy prostitution had already produced an effect extensive enough to bring a large number of peasants out this early morning. They ran clustering from all sides as screams of

woe rose from the peaceful camp. Their way was obstructed by fleeing brothers and sisters. Then cudgel against cudgel. Scythes lopped swordswinging hands. Sharp lances of bamboo penetrated looming bodies. On the backs of murderous soldiers rained poles and rootclumps. Mouths agape, groans, thuds, clanging. Steaming sweat, thin fountains of blood, irregular rhythm of quiet and uproar. “Kuan-yin, help me!” Half an hour later the demon of the place was sated. A hundred soldiers lay still, over two hundred sisters and brothers, forty peasants.

The sectarians gathered themselves. Furious flight bore them from that place.

Towards evening they arrived at a great lake to the north, called by the inhabitants the Lake of Harmony, halted, horrified that they’d left to the peasants the coffining and burial of their dead. Ma comforted. On the way he’d already received intimations from an informed source that the fallen sisters and brothers died well prepared; their souls were now winging their way towards the yearned-for realm.

By the moonbright lake he consulted with eight brothers on the next step. They couldn’t let themselves all be murdered. With feigned decisiveness Ma countered that it was all the same what day you died on; all that mattered was whether the soul was prepared. He spoke glibly and felt he wasn’t quite meeting the enormity of the situation. He had no answer to the question: whether they shouldn’t take adequate precautions instead of rushing towards death.

Hundreds and hundreds were flocking to the banner of the Broken Melon; but no Traverse to the home they yearned for was being prepared, no haven for the depraved and ruined. Deception was the only word for it, a callous disgrace. They were being led to the slaughtering block, the slaughtering block and not the Western Paradise.

To the music of shrill reed pipes they whispered. Ma No’s inconsolable hot gaze fastened almost randomly on the great monastery across the water. Beneath the brightness of the sky he could make out every building in the lamasery, the many chapels,

the great broad prayer hall, the dormitories for the monks. He'd lived for years in just such peaceful buildings. Now once again, an outcast with several hundred others, he sat before those gates. Separated by a lake.

The brothers choked on desperate decisions. They should dissolve the league. No one wanted to bear the terrible responsibility. They implored Ma No: "What shall we do, what shall we do?" Tomorrow, the next day, in a week provincial troops would arrive, surround the Broken Melon, crush the brothers and sisters. No doubt about it: today a report from the local authorities to the prefect, Tsungtu: breach of the peace in the province. Before long an attack by the government. What crime had the Broken Melon committed for this to come about? No amount of complaining would help. What should they do? Beloved brothers dead, lovely sisters, pious wanderers dead. Streams of blood, shattered skulls, throats offered freely: unthinkable, all of it, agonizing, crushing, to ascend to the Western Realm between sour sweat and war cries. The league, the circle broke.

Ma No sat silent, listened within himself. He recalled suddenly the first discussion between the Nank'ou beggars and Wang Lun in his hut. They'd pressed Wang into seeking the protection of the White Waterlily. For the Broken Melon there was no protection, they were friendless, Wang Lun had climbed to his feet with his long battle sword, slipped by night away from the camp of those who were once his brothers.

Seething hatred for Wang Lun erupted over Ma. His arm was shaken from within, his teeth ground. A decision raged from his knee into his toes, agitated his diaphragm so that his breathing stopped; lightning and thunderclaps reverberated through him.

The little bright prayer flags on the flat roofs across the lake flapped in the breeze, stretched.

In the mute dawn Ma No signalled to the camp. There was a rushing around the lake. Swiftly the monastery was surrounded before the monks inside were woken by the first three blasts of the conch for matins.

Ma banged with his fist on the door. Five of the brothers followed him across the yard up into the Chanpo's lofty chamber. In the bare high room, a few steps leading down into it to a curtained space, the Chanpo stood in front of a finely carved wall table on which were likenesses of venerable monks. He was a man still young, with calm, spiritual features. Ma No in his patchwork gown had not deigned to be turned away by the porter; the abbot waited to hear what occasioned such urgency. He seemed disinclined for the moment to regard the six strangers as his guests; greetings concluded he remained silent.

Ma gave his name and those of his companions, explained with cold restraint that he must treat with the abbot on a matter of importance.

To which came the answer: the distribution of alms was the office of a brother to whom the porter would now lead them; he would advise them also on medical assistance and the relief of immediate needs.

Ma No wished to speak with the Chanpo.

He invited them hesitantly to be seated on knee stools, with the admonition that early Mass would begin shortly.

Ma No, sitting, explained that their time was limited to the time between two breaths, and they would soon be at an end. Perhaps the adept of the holy Saktas texts had learned magical formulae from the discourse of the Gods, with which to save men from utter bodily annihilation.

The abbot was astonished at this learned beggar, and said slowly that he knew a few protecting syllables; turned his yellow eyes onto the man.

Perhaps, Ma continued, the learned abbot trusted in these protective syllables enough that he would join with them in their peril.

The Chanpo, more astonished, declared that he trusted in these syllables and in many others; but was the questioner perhaps a Gelugpa in disguise, seeking him out in this way and examining him; what did it all mean and who were they.

Ma No, likewise rising to his feet, said there was no need to break off a conversation that had just started, was almost at its goal; and an early Mass foregone weighed less in the scales of sanctity than the murder of a thousand men and women. For they'd best proceed without circumlocution and politeness. Would the illustrious Chanpo go down now into the plain with his five hundred monks, pursued by criminals but trusting in the Tantra formulae? Would the illustrious Chanpo mind casting an eye through the open window to see what transformation the night had wrought. Two steps to the window, and the abbot pulled it open. Murmuring of monks in the yard; the shimmering lakeshore, as far as the eye could see in the early mist, blackened, decked over by hundreds of shifting bodies, men, women, wagons, handcarts; they kept so quiet that not even the monks outside on their way to Mass had any inkling.

The abbot's face, square, frozen, did not turn; he croaked, "Are they the criminals who are to pursue us?"

Ma No, moving across beside him, quickly shut the window in his face. Those were the persecuted who sought protection with him. But of course no one could say for sure when the persecuted might not turn into persecutors and criminals. They were the Broken Melon; an unchaste name for the most chaste of things; they'd been massacred at dawn; their dead lay a day's march behind on the open field; now he, Ma No, required lodging, strong walls and protection for his harried people.

There came a knock at the door; the abbot turned his head. He was unable to attend the service; let another take his place; let them not read too slowly, and then send the officiating Gelugpa brother up to him.

"What, in simple words, do you want from me, brother Ma No?"

"You must let us into your monastery, men and women, and then bar the gates, great Chanpo."

"How can I protect you? Is the protection of persecuted armies any business of a monastery? One who stands in the open and draws lightning on himself should not blink at the thunderbolt."

"No one's blinking. We don't need preaching. We need protection.

If the great Chanpo and his monks don't have enough space for us in the monastery, then the great Chanpo and his monks will have to leave the monastery. For a few weeks. Until things go better for us. There's no choice for us. That's the straight answer. And the great Chanpo too has no choice—if he doesn't want to stand there two days from now spattered with our blood lamenting his dreadful reincarnations. On his shoulders the weight of a hundred unfree souls."

Ma No waited with his five brothers in a room on the ground floor; they drank again, after such a long time, fine hot tea in painted cups. The voices of the abbot and his deputy sounded raggedly from above. After an hour's debate the abbot had them recalled. In his hand, his face colourless, he still held the sumptuous black prayer sceptre. Beside him stood his deputy, Mongol features in a sharp grey head. With impressive gentleness the abbot bade Ma No preserve the monastery well with all its treasures; he would send emissaries to him from the small monastery across the river, to which he would himself repair, and inform him when the danger was over for them and they could leave the monastery. He had prayed to Amithaba to save the souls of these persecuted unfortunates.

Ma walked stiffshanked across the yard that swarmed with excited monks. The gates opened; outside he was surrounded. Then a cheer arose that spread outwards like a flash fire.

When the hot sun stood on the meridian the mighty doors heaved open. From the many buildings monks streamed together, arranged themselves in line, tended to paraphernalia on the ground. The evacuation of the Chanpo and his entire body of monks was in progress. The throng before the gates parted.

Spirituality, the world's supreme good, appeared among these paupers who were taking a dilettantish, much shorter road to the eternal Heaven of Bliss. In the van young novices with empty hands, uncovered heads; the Banti, bald round skulls with a little tuft of hair on the crown.

Five abreast, monks in long brown cowls down to their feet; many

had the red priest's sash slung from left shoulder to right hip; some wore robes, loose yellow gowns leaving the right shoulder bare. All topped with black square-cornered caps. Murmuring. In pairs they carried red baskets with inscriptions enjoining devoutness. Behind in sedan chairs priests of all orders, among them in a yellow-trimmed chair the Chanpo. Between the highest priests students with cushions in their hands, bearing altarpieces and the seven treasures, animals ingeniously carved, cast; elephant, goldfish, horse, offering bowls of silver, embossed plates, jugs, bronze mirrors, holy symbols of the five senses. Covered carts drew forth the all-embracing Book, called the Mother: twelve heavy volumes with woodframed pages. In front, near the Chanpo, monks clanged gongs from time to time, pumped lungs into monstrous trumpets that rested on the shoulders of those in front.

On wide litters statues of the great Gods swayed; the immaterial uncovered faces looked out over the excited crowd, tolerated the fresh smell of the lake. There sat the king of shining beryl on the lotus throne; in his dangling right hand he held the mystical gold-coloured myrobalans; the two Buddhas with the lion's face and the Precious Headdress accompanied him. The fearsome picture of the salvation-dispensing Goddess, riding on a sea of blood, emerged from the gloom of her chapel into the warm bright air; her three eyes that flashed lightning, her burning eyebrows were no match for the even cheerfulness of the sunlight that played with undiminished strength over her serpentridden face. At last the porter dragged his stale, stunted body past Ma No, wheezed dreary prayers as he gave him the padlock to the gate.

Trumpet blasts still blared from the right bank of the lake, now and then a gong beat. Jubilant, weeping, grave, the poor Broken Melon poured in absurd procession into the empty courtyard, mudcaked men, the wounded, bloodspattered, girls with bright dresses and dried flowers in wild hair, the song girls with nervous laughter, the stammering babbling blind and crippled. They thronged into the courts, the chapels, the prayer halls from which the Gods of heaven had been withdrawn, filled every corner and

every space up to the painted ceilings with their misery.

They settled into the monastery. While craftsmen were marvelling at the height and sturdiness of the brick walls, cripples and the wounded bedding down on red divans in the prayer hall, sisters hauling beans and millet from the storerooms and cooking them in the still warm cauldrons, up in the Chanpo's room Ma No and his intimates sat, brooded. They kept exchanging sheepish glances; here were riches and protection; but this was not good. They sat in damp clothing in the neat, well decorated room; their shoes and gowns trickled dirty puddles onto the wooden floor. A sharp fusty vapour rose from the soaked fabric, irritated their noses; their eyes streamed. With an involuntary movement the younger, serious Liu asked, "Shouldn't we go and pitch ourselves tents in the courtyard?"

Ma No went with them; he didn't say no, didn't say yes. Metaphysical conversations hummed in the low corridors of wood through which they passed. There had never been talk here of hunger, mankilling; the wood of the building was saturated with thoughts of the world's creation and destruction. Ma No's companions sensed nothing of this atmosphere. He tagged perforce along behind them; these rooms and passages excited him as if little ghosts, calling taunting ghosts, filled them. Absently he gave advice. From their old boards the people below were cobbling together huts, tents in the yards, in order to leave the halls unoccupied. He went slowly back to the Chanpo's room, couldn't tear himself from it. Alone in the great empty house he knelt in the Chanpo's room before the bare Buddha altar, pulled through his fingers a rosary that lay beside a hassock, told the beads. The reek of fusty clothes was overpowered by the balmy smell of incense.

"Once again Ma No, the ordained monk from P'ut'o-shan, sits in a monastery," he said out loud to himself. He felt he was resting and wanted it to be good for a few moments. Besmirched the monk sat there in the monastery, and felt no shame, no fear. Even now the screams of the slaughtered rang in his ears. After that bloodbath he

breathed, remembered he still lived; rosaries, Buddha statues, the precious altarpieces, jewels, let them all be carried away; he was alive, breathed, had found his way back. They'd taken the elephant, symbol of the five senses; Ma No's features twisted in scorn: all that was false, that's not how it's done. A new method, another way! Bells, incense, prayers: they should have heard the poor sisters whimpering. They played games with the ancient hoary beasts, caricatured reflexions of an alien land. Every holy mountain, every sprawling monastery complex rose uselessly over the land around; the death rattle of a single brother was enough to send them tumbling. How imposingly the Chanpo had stood there, and now he was being carried to some little chapel and he, Ma No, the hermit from Nank'ou, sat in his place, laughed defiance at the empty altar table; the gods decamped when he arrived. What are monasteries? Places where you dream and take the wrong path. Only the walls are good, the roofs are good. They protect from storms at night and rain; they bar the way to ghosts; winter squats outside the door.

Protection from criminals. Oh, monasteries had a use. No ruffians bent on mischief could break in and sink spears into strange backs. How they'd slaughtered the brothers and sisters that morning; they'd fallen by the dozen though they'd prayed so hard. If the peasants hadn't come, those brutes doing a Prefect's dirty work would have trampled all the young harvest. Bastards, bastards! He'd had to watch as they crushed his people, he was helpless against those bastards. And he wanted to be helpless. Somewhere in northern Chihli Wang Lun was prowling, Yellow Leaper at his side; he took murder and mankilling on his soul; the Truly Powerless were spreading. Only the Broken Melon, his sad poor sisters and brothers, were homeless, pathless.

Should a man die, should you really understand the great doctrine like this: fate comes from somewhere, you stand in its way and let yourself be chopped? Should you die? Should you?

Ma No turned from the floor over which he had crouched his body, noticed the rosary in his hand, laid it down, rubbed his hands, rubbed his temples.

Dying would be good. Why not? It wasn't a question of living, but of arriving well prepared with laden arms at the gates of that calm lovely paradise. Years earlier, years later, wouldn't make it any better.

Were they prepared, though? Were they prepared?

Ma No's hand felt for the rosary. He stood upright, climbed the steps to the Chan-po's richly hung bedroom; pulled aside the curtain, threw himself, rosary at his breast, onto the bed. An unfamiliar clatter echoed through the house: in the yard they were banging boards together; deep singing as from the inside of a tin can rumbled from a hall.

They weren't prepared. They needed peace, time, dig in, burrow, walls, walls! Hammering boards was useless; that wasn't how it was done. In the morning they'd be slaughtered, and nothing achieved. Weren't the feet of their persecutors tramping already? Life was full of noise, full of hate and fear: that was no way. Walls, walls! Here were walls, here, here!

Stormy joy for the throng out there in the courtyards swept through Ma No. His brothers and sisters, his, they were to walk the good road: his people. Better than the sons of Sakya.

When an hour had passed men came to the door, knocked, received no answer. They found Ma, the little dessicated man, asleep on the bed; he seemed to be very sweetly dreaming. He sprang up as they went quietly back down the stairs.

He was very calm, allowed himself to be shown to the hut they'd set aside for him, moved into it.

On that day and the next no attackers came. The Broken Melon relaxed into their old ways. Five days passed and still Ma No uttered no word of what should happen next. He was waiting. As he walked through the courtyards his receding brow was furrowed; no one disturbed him; his expression was dangerous. Ma had to mind his own counsel; he saw the limits of his capabilities; the league was plunging into the abyss and he couldn't prevent it. He must wait, gritting his teeth, until the brothers came to him and begged of their own accord for walls. He didn't dare strike such a blow against their

freedom; he had opponents; they wouldn't follow him any more. They enjoyed the security. They wanted to challenge fate: let it burst over them!

Yuan with the almost square face, a remarkably flat nose, cold eyes, skull almost devoid of occiput, had a very changeable way of speaking. Mostly his speech was hesitant, glutinous; now and then, it might be on a quite trivial matter, he indulged in a rapid, apparently unmotivated outburst with vehement mimicry and gestures, so that in general you had the impression of considerable self-control. In fact this was hardly the case: he exercised self-control, but not over any particular passion. Early thirties, native of Szechuan, son of a wealthy feather merchant, a failure in the lowest examinations, ambitious without talent. Sometimes he was sluggish, dull, sometimes wild; mostly wild—he feared his vagueness would become obvious. He tried to insinuate himself among the sectarians, to make himself respected as agitated he cast dark words about him, words that he mulled over later, believing that all cogitation was performed in this same blind way.

The two cousins Liu more banal characters, fanatics, very similar in their way of thinking, roughly the same age; the younger Liu, known by his childhood name of Little Third, though sanguine like the other was more sceptical, feared that nothing would come of all their hopes, was greatly depressed by his own scepticism. They had once worked in a porcelain factory, then unemployed had hit upon aurifaction, the secrets of which a cheeky bonze claimed to have imparted to them. Even now they carried about little pots of cinnabar; they expected a lot of the powers that their conversion to the Tao would bestow on them: perhaps they'd discover the Pill of Immortality.

Yuan was the first to engage the leader of the sect in a conversation about what would happen next. He added quickly that, in his view, there wasn't any need at all to leave the monastery. The priests would take good care not to press for a violent assault; and as for the government helping them off its own bat, that was highly doubtful.

Ma No showed interest, urged him to use his ears and find out what was being said about the future of the sect.

For all their fanaticism the two Lius were a hardheaded pair. Between themselves they often discussed the problem of the sect. In the forefront of their thoughts: the sect's expanding, it's carried along by true, earnest thoughts, it needs time to reach full maturity; but as soon as winter came there'd be an end to the Broken Melon. During a furtive stroll they'd heard from Ma No the terrible story of the mountain runners of Nank'ou; neither doubted that coming winter would outdo the last in horrors for the Broken Melon.

What they meant exactly by "full maturity of the sect" they knew as little as most of the others who used similar phrases. It was a notion of a too intense suggestiveness that mocked any attempt to analyse it, if disturbed let in a surge of terror. The notion lurked in the background, they could reply on it, ignore it, they lived according to the prescribed rules and were sure that at a certain time the things promised by the notion would automatically be fulfilled.

Both agreed at once with Yuan that the monastery must be held. Only Little Third started grumbling. Whether the government mightn't really attack, and then there wasn't enough room for a long stay, and where would all the food come from.

Their debates attracted a very fanciful professional storyteller by the name of Cha, who always went about naked to the waist in order to absorb as much as possible of the active principle of the sun, the Yang. A good-humoured crackpot with fine, lively young eyes, a man trusted by everyone who came in contact with him.

Another who took part in the conversations was a great serious fellow, in his mid-forties perhaps, who disclosed neither name nor history. Only Ma No knew his fate. He was gaunt, wore untidy dangling moustaches and beard, was extraordinarily kind and polite to everyone with a shyness and passivity to match. Perhaps no one in the sect was so correct in prayer and in watchfulness over his thoughts, so careful in observing the precept that nothing, whether plant or animal or man, should be harmed unnecessarily. He was

known as “Yellow Bell”, because he spoke almost always in a particular pitch corresponding to the keynote gung of the first pitchpipe, and this pipe was called *huang chung* or Yellow Bell. Yellow Bell, as everyone knew, was an intimate friend of lovely Liang-li, whose domineering, easily enraged nature was wonderfully calmed by his company. One of the reasons why this unknown man was often drawn into important discussions was that, although women were never allowed to take part in debates, Laing-li was eager to hear firsthand reports of them.

Old Cha was pessimistic. The teller of tales knew better than anyone how to distinguish fairy tales from reality. He agreed with the points put forward by the younger Liu, agreed quite strongly; reproached Yuan: where did he get such a shabby idea as to trick the pious monks out of their monastery? Several times his ardour got the better of him. At such moments he lost his footing on solid ground, floundered in fury, struggled against monstrous giants, imaginary mammoths that had nothing to do with the subject. Ended up conscious only of his threatening posture and the ringing of his voice, of having opposed something; awaited a response.

Yellow Bell purred in a monotone; he bent aside in order not to contradict. Busied himself with staring startled at old Cha and making courteous remarks about the power of his imagination and his way of thinking. When asked for his opinion, he was grateful that they thought him capable judging. He didn’t himself feel equal to such weighty decisions, had full and unreserved confidence in whatever conclusion the others reached. Finally he dragged forth an observation with the express qualification that it represented only a guideline for his private existence and he would never, not for anything in the world, want it to be taken for an actual opinion. And finally he was only voicing it because the gentlemen wanted him to and he didn’t want to offend the gentlemen.

He could only second the views of the sagacious Mr. Cha. Indeed, if he might be so bold, he could, nay must, go farther, at least as far he was concerned. They would have to see how they stood up to winter and hunger in the old way. And if it went badly for them,

well, everyone had to die, that was fate. And they too would die of course, for they all yearned only for the Tao, not life. If they saw the Spring, that would be a miracle, scarcely to be believed. Finally he wasn't even sure whether they shouldn't be thankful, for one day sooner at their goal had greater merit than one day later. But the older men knew all this much better than he did, and he was only offending them with this recital of mindless banalities.

Such was the burden of Yellow Bell's chime. The great quiet man looked shamefaced at the ground; the utterance had caused him distress.

Ma No squatted one morning with the four men in an inner courtyard that lay far back and rose steeply towards the monks' burial ground. Grass sprouted thick here between the stones; ancient elms stood over the yard. In their shade the men sat, and lovely Liang sat there too in a torn and patched yellow gown. Her hard face had grown thin, her movements, formerly so full of energy, had taken on a certain gentle pliancy, her narrow eyes flashed their old black fire.

Ma No had joined the discussion at their request. Yuan explained their worries and what they'd been debating. Ma No agreed they ought to be worried. But opinions differed, reported Yuan, who acted as the spokesman, and with a gesture invited the younger Liu to speak.

Ma let the talk flow over him. He knew no clarity would be achieved. Wang Lun's ideas, long since refuted, were too strong in these people.

Fate would have to speak more clearly. He turned his mind to the things he saw coming, that couldn't be turned aside. He suffered under his helplessness.

Lovely Liang-li, brought along for the first time to one of these discussions, looked at him. At first there'd been a feeling over her heart of mute scorn for Ma No. But only for a moment. This wasn't a man like the others, like her father, her lawful husband, her friends in the sect, Yellow Bell. She wasn't his equal just because she was allowed to sit discussing with him and look him in the face. It was

hard to believe that the formation of their league of love was all his doing. And in some obscure way she realized that for Ma No their league was something other than what it was for her, that no warmth underlay it, rather something nauseously tormenting, something menacing, a fall of rocks.

She shivered, remembered her first impression of him as a strange, reclusive man who, having abandoned his gloomy cave, walked the way of truth and effortlessly pulled along in his wake all those who clung to him. He wasn't to be crossed. It was dreadful, unbelievable to think he'd lost his way.

Ma No spoke in incomprehensible calm. The sect would go under soon. Provincial troops would march against them, or winter would come.

They'd go on like this for a couple more months, then they'd all go separate ways, to kin or on the high roads or outside the Imperial rice distribution points. You couldn't expect a bloodbath like the recent one to have no effect on the behaviour of a great crowd. The influx would dry up from now on. And what conclusion could you draw from this? That you should let everything run its course. He had no hope at all for the sect. Soon pogroms would be stirred up against them, it was only a matter of time. Everyone for himself. Each to his own pitiless fate.

This was music to the ears of the great strange man known as Yellow Bell. He murmured to himself that fate took its course; it fell on each of them in a peculiar way. You had to shake yourself free left and right so as not to evade your fate.

Yuan and the two Lius stretched their legs, squinted at the ground. Yuan stood up: That wouldn't do, it would not do. Not even the hermits of the Buddha religion thought like that, and they still looked on the community of the pious as a holy treasure. Despite his considered words he was agitated and waspish. He had no time for Yellow Bell. Yuan had to restrain himself, else he would have started jeering.

Her fine head raised to Yuan, Liang asked what the clever teacher from Szechuan thought about the fate of the Broken Melon; if they

were supposed to live for ever as if they'd already found the subtle jade powder.

Man No's smile at the moment was of such emphatic arrogance that Liang, mouth open, turned and drew the eyes of the other four onto Ma. Whose smile stayed unaltered, fixed as they all stared, changed only when the elder Liu shouted, What did he think? with a puckered sneer.

Ma said, "The acumen of our sister Liang-li pleases me. Beautiful hearths, some poets have called women; but Yuan no doubt ceased to think so when a little spark from the beautiful hearth singed him. How does the rest of that wonderful verse go, Yuan, that you recited to me not long ago, by you yourself or a poet of the T'ang dynasty?"

Yuan bowed, flattered. "It's a verse of Tu Fu's unlucky Censor of the Emperor Hsüan-tsung." He recited: *"At P'eng-lai Palace the gate is turned to the southern mountain. Toward Heaven stretch bronze pillars with their basins where the dew collects. Westward lies the Lake of Jasper, to which the royal mother descends."* Liang raised her left hand towards Yuan: "And another verse, by Yuan O-tsai goes: *Flown is the bright play of clouds, ere the yellow millet is well cooked*."

At which Yellow Bell burst into a peal of laughter such as might ring out from an ox stall of a soldier horde, but quite incongruous from him and revealing in some inexplicable way something of his past. Already in his ineffably embarrassed way he was begging their pardon he'd been quite lost in thought, his laughter wasn't related in the slightest to anything said by anyone present. Nevertheless the effect on the others of this sudden coarse eruption was so disagreeable they feel silent, looked through one another and Liang asked Ma No if he wouldn't rather take stroll or sit on a mat, he was shaking so.

But Ma No, who had indeed stood up, merely sat down beside Yellow Bell and soothed him. The clever man, smiling all the while at the others and turning to Yuan, said the clearly they'd not remained untouched by life. "We suffer so much and become ever less capable resolve. We are flies, whose legs and wings have been pulled off by children."

Yuan shrugged, fidgeted, disappeared to inspect the halls again with radiant eyes, marvel at the chapels.

Liang walked beside Yellow Bell and Ma No towards the open gate of the monastery across luminous winding courtyards. Ma felt he was carrying these two like a bag of stones on his back. Yellow Bell was the most fearsome of all the sectarians. He could have let him fall, but his ambition needed this man; he must master him, he must.

Lovely Liang dreaded her fate. She couldn't wipe away the memory of Ma's arrogant smile. It was like a white tiger gazing from a rock down onto a man coming unawares around a bend. What was this man planning?

While Ma kept a stern eye on silent Yellow Bell, the lovely Liang mused. They had set course for the Isles of Bliss. The helmsman on such a fearsome voyage must himself be fearsome. Yellow Bell walked unperturbed beside her.

And ever so quietly the sign that Ma had foreseen had been preparing itself. When on the seventh day sixty of the local people knocked at the monastery gate, the sign caught up with the Broken Melon.

The sect had made its home in one of the richest parts of western Chihli. Cotton was grown here; sericulture was highly developed.

A peculiarity of the district was the occurrence of active salt wells. In the course of decades a great number had been dug and whole livelihoods depended on the wells. To win the slat a funnel-shaped hole a yard across was dug until water was struck. At the bottom brine was allowed to collect and evaporate; it was brought up in buckets. As on the coast, the further preparation was divided among salt boilers, panners and stockpilers. In giant kettles and pans the slat boilers drove off the water from the mother brine. Hay for heating the kettles was provided by the wealthier owners of grazing land and farmland, most of whom at the same time stockpiled the salt arranged its transport, delivered prescribed quantities to the

Imperial depots. Whoever among the well diggers owned sufficient land could work faster, let the briny groundwater flow over tamped earth levels, hasten evaporation in the sun. Transport of the dutiable heaps of salt was almost entirely along waterways; only short stretches called for mules, carts, ox wagons to transport the commodity to the next river or canal.

Now nine years earlier the father of a man called Hou of this district had been carried off by the smallpox. He had been a judiciary official with a reputation for competence, plain and strict in the extreme, greatly feared for the brevity and succinctness of his judgements. By clever speculations in the purchase of rice, which he then sold on to the government, this man had amassed great wealth. He bought more estates. When he reached the fourth rank he retired, made presents to the Imperial privy purse, continued to speculate with circumspection and one day returned from a journey across country in poor condition; the corpulent man had to be lifted from his chair; he soon died.

His eldest son, the present landowner Hou, as a child the worry of the family for his sickliness, was no less shrewd than his father; but whereas the older man had used people as they offered themselves to be used, he for no reason was hard and cold towards everyone. In his outward figure he took completely after his father, the ponderousness, the plumpness of the limbs, the amiable rustic burr. He shunned ostentation, observed all the prescribed rites strictly, led an exemplary family life. Despite his hardness in commerce he exuded a certain joviality, so that many of the common people who had no business dealings with him were true partisans of his. He increased his property, though not blessed with his father's farsightedness.

Two years after the old man's funeral misfortune began to assail Hou. Two of his sons died in the same month of an unknown sickness that caused them to lie rigid for days, tossing their heads, then begin to rave and perish before the demon responsible could be identified. His best friend in southern Chihli let him down in the course of a few daring speculations, of a kind that would have

brought his father success: Hou amassed great piles of rice in his storehouses; the speedy export of rice from his friend's stores was supposed to lead in southern districts to an artificial increase in the price, which Hou would exploit. But the friend claimed not to have secured in time the great barges he'd ordered; Hou was left sitting on enormous stocks. There followed at short intervals two arson attacks on his properties, causing severe losses. Thus set in a turn in his fortunes.

Hou had often regarded with painful feelings the canal that passed in front of his villa; the long barges of the salt transport, transporting as well grapes, plums, pears, the cries of the haulers, the scraping of ropes against the canalside; from here it was a short journey to a broad tributary of the Imperial Canal.

An astrologer visited him about this time from Peking, who because of his ignorance had been relieved of his post in the Ministry of Rites. Since he could not penetrate the secret of computing important events, he found for himself a scandalous profession that came all the easier to him with his respectable figure, his reticent confidence-inspiring demeanour: he became a factor in the extensive trade in children for the southern provinces, new blood for the theatres and houses of pleasure. The trade was carried on under the mask of adoption or procurement for adoption; on occasion he provided apothecaries or very wealthy invalids with little children whose eyes, liver and blood would be processed and used. As a sideline this man was a highly esteemed marriage broker.

As he sat with Hou in a pavilion on the estate beside the little canal and his sorely afflicted friend related his woes, they sat there a while smoking the waterpipe and watched the haulers toiling as they broke a passage through the frozen water.

The astrologer asked whether the land on the other side of the canal also belonged to Hou, and for how far, and what sort of goods were transported here. After a couple of gurgling pulls on the pipe gave as his opinion that the canal ought to be closed.

Hou understood at once, laughed, warned him to speak softly. Of course it would be good if the canal were closed, but quite

impossible to achieve. Naturally if some conceivable way could be found he wouldn't forget his friend. The canal was important for those and those and those; if anyone did manage to close it there'd be enormous profit to be gained.

The dignified astrologer, simply attired in black, was grateful for the presumptive splitting of profits; of that later. He sat in thought, spoke suddenly in melancholy tones of the death of old Hou, so highly valued by the Emperor, and when had he been buried, who had specified the place. Then without explanation, bewailing the untimely death of that true friend of the nation, he went into the house with his friend, lit candles before the ancestral tablet. He excused himself and retired for contemplation, as he said, to the room placed at his disposal.

Next morning, accompanied by the boorish rheumy-eyed local astrologer, he had himself carried to old Hou's grave furnished with all his professional equipment: compass, zodiacal table, windrod. After investigating for three days, they put their extensive calculations together for comparison and came to the conclusion that the position of the grave was disturbed by the line of the canal. The constricted nature of the site made it impossible to ameliorate the spirit's rest by erecting a pagoda. Hence the misfortunes in the Hou household since the old man's death.

Hou didn't catch on, and when the crafty astrologer began to lament the meritorious man's fate Hou threw himself howling to the ground, didn't know where to turn. He ran to the ancestral tablet; he didn't want the fault falling on his shoulders; he had to inform the departed that he wasn't to blame for the siting of the grave, not he. How could he, grateful son that he was with his daily obeisances, have come upon the dreadful idea of hounding his late father from his rest? Imploring he embraced the astrologer, and to his astonishment gazed into an artfully wry, chubby face. The astrologer grunted as the fat arms squeezed him, pushed his friend back, finished the censing, and they walked slowly to the garden pavilion down by the canal. The phlegmatic man from Peking said in ministerial tones, "We must not upset the deeply offended spirit of

your father still more by removing the grave. That would be the pinnacle of disrespect. The line of the canal must be altered. This canal must be closed as quickly as possible."

Fat Hou grunted "Yes, yes" in his misery, and then, after a pause during which they looked earnestly at one another, in a brighter voice, "Yes, yes."

The months-long correspondence with provincial authorities and the Ministry of Rites was taken over from the troubled, distraught son entirely by the astrologer. Weeks went by, for appraisers from the Imperial Astrological Bureau were charged with compiling an urgent report following the rejection of Hou's petition by the subordinate authorities on grounds of its damaging effect on the public weal. Ch'ien-lung, however, informed personally, stated without hesitation, "A canal can be dug elsewhere. Until another small canal can be completed with all necessary despatch, provisional means of transport are available. It is base to hound a deceased person of Hou's enduring service from his rest because of some temporary local inconvenience."

So the affair was settled. And before the guilds of haulers, salt boilers, coolies, wagon hirers in the villages to the west realized what was up, the lock gates were closed in utmost haste, the water drained into a lake by means of a connecting ditch that Hou had had dug even during the protracted negotiations. The transport of cargo had to be effected by quite other means; it had to be unloaded, carried by land a day's journey across Hou's property to what was now the end of the canal. Hou refused to allow the first coolies, wagoners onto his land. Hasty intervention from the prefecture resulted in the granting of passage, for the time being free of tolls. It was left to Hou to discuss with the relevant trade associations how to construct as quickly as possible a road through to the canal.

He acceded without further ado; but with the approval of the authorities, speedily gained, charged a small toll for the use of his property, erected five storesheds on open sites beside the road, helped the transport workers by placing large auxiliary wagons and oxen at their disposal. The profit was enormous; to it was added

gain from the pilfering that was unavoidable with so much transshipping and placing in storage. What it came to finally was that his place seemed the natural spot for a central salt depot, Hou by underhand methods having made transport difficult for those who stored their salt elsewhere.

For weeks it remained calm; throughout the affected district the guilds debated ceaselessy. In the prefecture it rained petitions. Barge haulers, unemployed, worked with the salt panners; these, insofar as they did not deliver grass to Hou, lost income from the reduction in storage dues. Unrest grew.

Then a newly arrived Prefect became involved in the affair in a way that nearly cost him his head. In the western counties Hou's case was nothing unusual. Tax evasion on an enormous scale had been perpetrated by the great landlords for decades; silk spinners, mill owners paid scarcely more tax than some insignificant casual labourer in their employ. In the register at the tax office these rich gentry were entered against some tiny patch of field, the property that their fathers and grandfathers had started out with; good relations with Superintendents of Taxes and with Prefects had seen to it that the initial declarations in the registers were passed down through the generations unrevised; false returns concerning fallow land, flooded areas helped.

As soon as a few cases of this sort had been brought discreetly to his notice, the young Prefect rode solemnly off to the nearest Principal Tax Office where the lists were displayed and reported to the Superintendent of Taxes, audibly, in the open yamen, within earshot of several people, what he'd been told, pointed in a loud voice to the discrepancies between the information in the lists and the actual properties. As he climbed back into his green sedan chair his runners and bearers looked at each other dismayed, trotted off shaking their heads. What the servants in the young Prefect's household predicted in their whispered conversations soon came to pass.

The old Superintendent, a well loved man treasured by the government for his knowledge of local conditions in Chihli and

Shantung, appointed a deputy for ten days. During this time, as he had announced, he travelled back and forth across his tax zone in order to acquaint himself with the situation, visited commercial enterprises, farms. But he had been unable to hold back the written petition to the central authorities handed in by the young Prefect together with his oral report, and waiting for the grey-haired mandarin on his return was an urgent demand from the Finance Ministry in Peking for a brief on the matters detailed in the attached memorandum.

While the young Prefect, still a bachelor, lay in the evenings beside a pool of red lotus and played the game of floating leaves with friends, his servants, who knew the locality, wrung their hands at his short-sightedness; they'd heard that dissatisfaction with the Prefect was making itself felt in the region.

Unexpected little disturbances arose during the arrests of thieves and at public punishments; there followed more serious incidents that began to keep the Prefect rather occupied. Finally, in several hitherto peaceful villages there occurred attacks on Imperial officials and buildings. A sharp instruction was handed down for him to suppress the unrest. It was no use; his constables declared themselves powerless. When a memorial arch erected by the Emperor in honour of a virtuous widow burned down in the open marketplace, it seemed that the Prefect's last hour had come.

Then plump Hou invited him for a talk, which the Prefect had already had in mind in view of the transport question. And now the crisis resolved itself in the simplest possible way. The Prefect had no choice; he had to think of the shame that would fall on his still living parents and his ancestors were he to be demoted; not to speak of his own desolate future.

Hou's family showed itself highly honoured by the visit. The grossly cringing Hou, hearing of his exalted guest's still living parents, offered the Prefect a summer residence for the aged couple on one of his estates; he twittered with expressions of the greatest concern at the current difficulties in the prefecture, placed his own excellently trained and armed estate guards at his guest's disposal.

The icy Prefect made no reply.

He sacrificed in front of his ancestral tablet, and prayed; for two days spoke with none of his friends. Then he accepted.

That afternoon at the offices and then at the residence of the Prefect, Hou's glittering return visit took place, to the unfeigned joy of the neighbours and servants, who praised the Prefect as a wise old man. All misunderstandings were brushed lightly aside; clearly one mistake had led to another, to overreaction, confusion. The happy administrator could expect in less than two weeks an acknowledgement from the central authorities of his energy and perspicuity in the suppression of this dangerous local rebellion. After a little ineffectual violence from villagers affected by Hou's measures, all was peaceful.

In those high summer days rumours arrived of the pious band of beggars; here and there a man left his village to seek out the Broken Melon. Everyone heard of the intrigues and assaults directed against these mild people; then came the great bloodbath, the monks withdrew from the lamasery, Ma No's frightened crowd hid behind strong walls.

Certain adherents of Ma's who were resident in the area informed the guilds and clansmen's associations of the sect's nature and its fate. At once a sympathy for the outcasts set in, a feeling of solidarity with them. Not a sod had been turned for the new canal; apparently as a result of military expenditures the Imperial Treasury was short of money. The families of many unemployed men wandered northward. Confused rumours of the Broken Melon were carried into the distressed villages: it was a clandestine political movement in league with the White Waterlily; they went defenceless through the land and let themselves be slaughtered; that happened so as to rouse the people and show them you could be lame, crippled and unresisting and still be delivered from the violence of the warlike Manchu and the cheating mandarins.

Frequent conferring among the inhabitants of the various

settlements resulted in the formation of a group of representatives of the several guilds and settlements which, in the face of official neglect, decided to migrate to the Broken Melon under Ma No. Hazy thoughts and boiling blood drove these men; they wanted to come together with Ma No, who had already taken possession of a monastery, and with him do something to improve conditions.

It was against this straggling train of peasants and workmen that the monastery gates were hastily closed and hastily opened again. When some brothers rushed to Ma No's hut and reported that a crowd of peasants and guildsmen of a friendly disposition had come to the monastery and wanted to talk to him, Ma considered it inexpedient to summon his confidants to the interview, had five of the newcomers escorted to the Chanpo's room and then appeared there himself.

They treated him like a potentate, fell down before him; embarrassed and afraid that someone would see, he had to ask them to look on him as one of themselves; he was one of them, a poor son of the blackhaired hundred surnames. And what did they want, who'd sent them.

This question set them grinning at each other; at a gesture from Ma they squatted in a semicircle on the floor. Then they were silent, not knowing who was to speak for them.

They were five elderly men, three salt boilers, one of the ruined panners, a wagoner. In arguments at home these canny fellows came up with excellent advice; here they were subdued by the presence of a man of Ma's reputation, and also by their haziness about this man's goals. The salt panner, the best educated among them, opened his mouth, looked at each of them in turn, and declared with grins and bobs of his head that since no one seemed to have any objection, he'd better speak. And he related with a few casual phrases who each of them was, where they lived, that they'd been badly treated by the great landlords and the mandarins.

The wagoner, who listened attentively and nodded agreement at every word, took up the tale at once: "And that's the point. That's the whole problem. We can't do a thing. The prefecture doesn't

answer our petitions. Who are you then, Ma No? Where d'you come from? Where do your illustrious parents live? Above all, what's to be done?"

"That's the whole problem," one of the salt boilers in a grumpy tone turned to the sprightly wagoner. "The point still is, as I've always said: what's to be done? And how are we to do it?"

The wagoner hushed him with hand gestures and winked at Ma. "He doesn't mean it like that. We quarrel now and then because our two domestic tribulations don't get along. When I say, how are we to do it? he says I'm wrong; I ought to ask, how might it best proceed. And if I say 'whoa' he thinks me ignorant and a bletherer, and finally lands up with a 'ho'. They all know about that in our village, and even farther afield. He's a fine lad, eh?"

He asked the panner, who coughed and hawked at length and rubbed· his nose; indignantly he rebuked the man: "Settle it how you like; I can't see anything to choose between you. We didn't march half a day here just to decide if it's better to say 'whoa' or 'ho'. What the whole point of it is, that's still the problem."

The wagoner, astonished, spread his hands as if to say, "That's just what I think," and nudged the irritated salt boiler, who motioned him away.

"So," the panner addressed Ma through a cold, "we've come to hear what you've got to say. Six of my villagers have joined up with your crowd and they've told us about you and the others. You call yourselves brother and sister, which we all find very friendly. Will you help us?"

"Or will you do something with us against the landlords and the Prefect, who're all hand in glove?" This from another salt boiler, a tall gaunt fellow who spoke with forefinger raised like a schoolmaster. "We're going to do something against them in the next few weeks, but we haven't got a plan yet."

"Plan, plan," grumbled the panner. "What ideas you do have. I could make you a plan easy enough. Don't go putting too much store by plans. I've seen people with the finest plans, and nothing came of 'em in the end. First of all Ma No's got to answer the question, in

short, will he take our part, or not?"

"Or help us or not," the sprightly wagoner elucidated.

Ma listened without breathing to this idiotic conversation. He was disturbed only by the fact that two of the salt boilers had so far kept out of it; but really they looked no different from their companions. This was the sign he'd been waiting for. Ma met it in a different manner from Wang Lun: while Wang fearfully concealed from himself that something he predicted was coming terribly to pass, it poured with warm filling satiation into Ma's gorge and belly.

Ma had the feeling that fate was bending beneath him, he flapped uncertainly past the notion, such a ridiculous notion, that his path and the Tao were magically superimposed on one another. While the guildsmen debated before him, he sat there dazzled and sweating from every pore in a kind of stupor; he strove to master himself.

He said he had no troops to help them with. They knew of course the Broken Melon were being persecuted, people wanted to destroy them. Villagers and Broken Melon alike had been slaughtered. They suffered under great violent lords.

"That's just why we came to you here in the monastery," the panner retorted. "Us villagers are at our wits' end. You're a clever man and know your books and your numbers."

The tall salt boiler, who spoke in an relentless schoolmasterly way, raised his forefinger: "There's something else you ought to know, Ma, since you're listening so calmly to what they all say, one after the other. It concerns you and all the brothers and sisters. It concerns all of you, I say. A nephew of mine's employed in a village half a day's journey from here in the felt-sole trade; he's a guest at present in my house. A workmate visited him yesterday from his village and told him that fifty or a hundred armed constables are on their way to you on account of the terrible slaughter of a week since. They're on their way already and will more likely be here today than tomorrow. What they'll ask you, and how they'll ask it, you'll find out soon enough. I tell you, since you're so clever and listen to them one after the other: this concerns you."

Ma No smiled: "In the eyes of men my brothers and sisters are

already lost. Who will help us? How long can my dear guests wait for the advice of their friend Ma No from P'ut'o-shan?"

They looked at each other. The panner croaked, "Would it suffice our clever friend for his consultations if we waited till midday or an hour later? Our homeward journey's not a short one, indeed not, and who knows what's brewing back there."

"Until midday."

They clumped out of the room. Ma No sat alone the whole long hour in front of the bare Buddha altar; to think was beyond him.

Fate was bending under him.

No more slaughter! The way assured. Fierce love for the brothers and sisters, hope blooming for every bliss, the radiant western gate! This feeling of joy grabbed him so hard he nearly called for help. He laughed to himself, softly; what a task these five messengers were taking on, these impudent childish men who compared their passion for guzzling and boozing with the passion of his brothers and sisters. But let them be blessed! What other use could be found for these gangs of salt boilers and stevedores than to station them round about to serve as mobile brickwork, flexible moats, excellently closable gates for the Broken Melon!

One hour after midday the five men stepped into the Chanpo's chamber, made to fling themselves down, dropped hesitantly onto the stools.

Ma No interrogated the salt panner again: who'd sent them, how many villagers they represented.

He countered with the impatient question: what result had come out of his calculations and what advice had he for them. At which Ma, looking each of them in turn sharply in the eye, said he couldn't give them any advice, but as soon as they set off for home he'd join them on the road, and two or three of his brothers and sisters would come too. He wanted to make some calculations on the spot. What was necessary and what could be deduced from the time and the conjunction of the Zodiac and the metals would then reveal itself.

The wagoner was astonished; in his view this decision hit the nail on the head in a quite extraordinary way. The learned salt boiler

turned his head to his companions as if awaiting an acknowledgement, then he stood up, placed himself beside Ma No and said softly to him, “I’d better tell you, Ma No from P’ut’o, that this foolish salt boiler standing beside you thought exactly the same way as you, out there in the yard. Of course the others couldn’t see it, they don’t let a man get a word in edgeways. So in the end I just kept it to myself. A man’s the only one who knows his own worth.”

And he grasped Ma familiarly by the shoulder.

The panner couldn’t quite work it out: “So there’s to be no advice, not direct, like ‘Go there, go there, over here, down there’? We learn something every day. Different things are quite different. You wouldn’t believe it. We need calculations on the spot so we know how to get started. There’s something in that. No doubt about it; I’ll not deny that.”

And he turned with coarse words on the conceited wagoner.

While the delegates conversed with their fellow villagers in the courtyards, surrounded by uneasy brothers and sisters, Ma No had a short, sharp discussion with his confidants in the secluded burial ground. Ma wanted these confidants to accompany him.

He wanted to break off his tactic of waiting. He desired unconditional agreement, submission to what he planned. In a curtly domineering tone he expressed the wish that they go with him to the mutinous district.

Only Yuan wanted to go with him; the Lius, and in particular Yellow Bell, declined to involve themselves in fighting. Lovely Liang-li stared at Ma No. This man horrified her more and more.

Then Ma, who was wandering up and down among the willows, assumed an uncommonly hard and agitated tone before this group of advisers. He scolded them for leaving him in the lurch, for knocking him, his courage already gone, to the ground. They had no feelings for the brothers and sisters, who, driven out from kin and guild and neighbours, sought refuge with them and within a few days would perish here like rats fed poisoned corn. They were his confidants; but instead of standing by him they encumbered, suffocated him.

At these reproaches Yellow Bell was seized with a wild trembling; he interrupted Ma several times with an exclamation; then he struggled for words: “It is not seemly to speak like that to us, Ma. What these brothers are willing to endure from you I don’t know; you shan’t speak to me in this unseemly way, as if to a house slave. We owe you nothing. You are blunt, and lacking in your wise demeanour. You rave. We don’t deserve this. You mustn’t treat us so.”

He trembled so violently that, sitting on the ground, he fell onto his face; down his thin brown cheeks tears flowed.

Anger flashed from Liang’s eyes; she could not bring herself to speak; the younger Liu, the sceptical Little Third, set himself in front of Ma, said calmly, “Us Lius are made of baser metal than Yellow Bell; we don’t cry. Ma’s no longer treating us as confidants. Why does he want to go with the peasants, why should we accompany him? If we’re not told anything, he’ll learn that us Lius can take a scolding; for the rest, we do what we think right.”

Ma controlled himself. “All of you, even Yellow Bell, will understand at once why I rave and will refrain from accusations and stop plaguing me with tears. Provincial troops are on their way, the peasants told me. This time they’re no hired bandits, ha, for sure, now you look at me. But you don’t trust me. Whatever I don’t peel away like the layers of an onion I’ve made up, and if I succumb to anger at it you’ll still kill me one of these days. How many days is it, dear Liu, dear sister Liang, brother Yellow Bell, until the Great, Great Traverse?”

Yuan was the most nervous of them. Since the assault he had slept little, had wild dreams and cried out in his sleep; in actual danger he bore himself as a rule with notable steadfastness and by his demeanour instilled courage in others. Blood rushed to his head when he heard of the impending attack; he cried to the two Lius, “Can we stop arguing now? Does any of us want to be called traitor against the hundreds out there? We must hurry, hurry and again hurry, that’s the end of this whole discussion. What are we doing sitting here so long?”

“We shall stay sitting here,” replied Liang. “Whoever fears for his body should stay in the city, compose verses and lounge in a sedan chair.”

Yuan’s highcoloured face grew mottled; his throat seemed swollen, so gummy and husky his voice as he burst out: “The chatter of women does not disturb the educated man. No more than the howling of grown men should put a stop to a serious debate. One’s agitated, another’s not. What of it? You all sit there and sit till evening, and when the hundreds who follow us feel the sabre between their shoulderblades it’s all over. But it mustn’t all be over. That’s not for you to decide by squatting there. I’m in this as much as you. Ma must speak, Ma No must put us right.”

He fell silent, because all the while Yellow Bell’s great face was smiling at him in such a friendly way that he let his voice trail off in confusion and stop.

Yellow Bell addressed him: “Don’t stop speaking, Yuan. No one will hold it against you if you say what’s in your heart.” He pumped his hands in greeting towards Ma and Yuan; they responded, hesitant and polite.

At last only Liang remained sitting on the ground, stared at the grass. Little Third spoke sympathetically to her; he helped her up; she went with lowered head to Yuan, bowed deeply before him until he returned the greeting; then she inclined her narrow shoulders before Ma, embraced him in front of the others, said in an unhappy voice, “Help, Ma No. Bring it all to an end. You are right about everything. No slaughter, don’t let that happen. Save whoever you can, us included, me included.”

An hour later Ma and his confidants slipped away with the five village delegates. Most of the other villagers remained in the monastery at the urging of the respected salt panner, who told them to look after the threatened sectarians. It became evident on the way that Yellow Bell had not calmed down; during the night, which they had to spend in the open, he was heard groaning beside Liang, who tried to comfort him. In the morning he found some excuse to separate from them, and made his way back to the monastery.

Next afternoon they came to a village, the largest of this region, where the salt panner had his property. Quickly Ma surveyed what was of interest to him, listened to great numbers of people. They rode for a while on mules through other villages. Crowds of unemployed men emerged from the houses, stared at the strange procession, fell to the ground.

Before nightfall the sectarians held a brief discussion; they burned with the feverish notion that Imperial troops had already reached the monastery.

Then hinnies bore the exhausted figures back. More than a hundred of their new friends followed in excitement; they ran through the tall kaoliang. Overnight they allowed themselves an hour's rest; early in the morning they approached the lake.

A pale gleam of fire rose across the water. They had come too late. The attack on the monastery already over; the monastery put to the torch by soldiers. Hundreds killed. The soldiers, scarcely hindered by the peasants who had stayed behind, fled after doing what they could to save the sisters, shut up in the chapels, from the flames. They had run away head over heels in superstitious fear as if they were the vanquished.

When Ma passed through the broken gate with the furious peasants, Yellow Bell was sitting in the gateway, called "Hail!" and "Triumph!" to Ma, who lay drooping on the grey beast's neck.

Ma, wordless, shook a fist over him. Even lovely Liang turned away sobbing from him.

How things went from here is well known. The Broken Melon left the monastery, the population of these regions rose against the Imperial officials. There followed the storming of prisons, expulsion of magistrates, landlords chased from their vast estates, their houses burnt. For days thick smoke piled over the farms. Not graves nor memorial arches nor pagodas were spared.

The first manifestos issued from a committee presided over by the salt-panner. The properties of evicted landlords were declared

forfeit; the rule of the alien Manchu dynasty, the Ta Ch'ing, was branded illegitimate, foreign, and hence abolished.

Insurrection spread rapidly to the northeast. From there two groups of Wang Lun's Truly Powerless, each of about three hundred men, marched towards the insurrectionaries, sought out the brothers in order to help them.

From the second week Ma No signed all proclamations, notices and so on. He sent emissaries to nearby towns, who pasted on the outer walls under cover of darkness a letter from Ma No to the Emperor Ch'ien-lung. In it Ma declared himself willing to acknowledge the rule of the Pure Dynasty, provided that the entire region affected by the rebellion was ceded by the central government to the administration of its own prince.

After another week the most crucial step was taken: the occupied districts were transformed into a spiritual kingdom on the pattern of Tibet, with the name "Isle of the Broken Melon". The task of this new state was defined as the nurture of paradisial aspirations. Ma No proclaimed himself priest-king of this spiritual land; a commission of three men, titled Law Kings, served at his side. Ma set up residence in the only town of any size in the occupied districts. Here plans were drawn up for the defence of the Isle, the raising of great double walls with watchtowers to encircle the whole region, watchtowers at stages on all main roads. Around a thousand of the local men remained under arms; arms for the rest were stored in the capital.

There were two kinds of people on the Isle: former residents in their houses, shops, in their fields, hills, in the orchards; and the brothers and sisters, by day toiling among them, otherwise keeping apart, many in huts, most in the fields near to the powerful spirits of the soil. The sectarians acquired no property, passed all earnings for which they had no immediate need to the royal treasury.

The time by the swamp of Talu had yielded full measure of wonder, tumult and joy. Here on the Isle they were hidden away. It was a masterstroke of Ma No's. He had lifted every burden from the Broken Melon; the wall he had wished for was a living thing

surrounding the brothers and sisters. The path of outward liberation for his adherents which he embarked on at the swamp had been trodden to its end. They were safe from destruction at the hands of blind fate.

Ma No's hardness grew during this time. From the moment he became priest-king of the district a sternness surrounded him which bordered on cruelty and revealed the well-schooled student of ascetic monks. Ma was not changed; but he once again found himself in a position where only his word was law. The fire at the monastery, where brothers and sisters lay charred before his eyes, still burned in him. He experienced no feelings of revenge; only the feeling that things that had started like this should not be allowed to end in farce. He listened no more to advice from his confidants. Sympathy for the half dead, the speared in the courtyards, in all the corridors almost killed him. He descended from the peak, stood among the wretched, confused, superstitious of his people, bent under their torments, was one with them.

Not one of his confidants did he acknowledge now. He strove in haste to draw all power to himself, feeling that otherwise he would sink under the responsibility. Not until he'd done his utmost for the sect would its fate be of no account; then he'd be able to stand and fall meekly with the others. No fire would trouble him then.

Ma No, unknowable man, sat on the throne of the Isle. No idol gazed more blindly than he. His faith in the Western Paradise had up to now been mingled with a sensation of ecstasy, a rapturous yearning; now Ma sat there sober, held this belief from him in an iron grip. He did not yearn for this paradise; coldly he requested, demanded entry for himself and his people. No longer was it a question of some dreamlike goal to to be reached slowly, step by step, but of something near, like the little wooden bridge he crossed every day, to which he went whenever he pleased, something purchased, paid for, overpaid tenfold, which no one could withhold from him. It was no longer a matter for dispute whether the Western Paradise really existed or not; events had furnished it with the most tangible signs of reality possible.

But now and then he was beset by a feeling that he would have to pay a price for it, that there might occur a circumstance in which a price such as he had already paid would have to be repaid, and so now what he wanted was not long life but a brief, urgent decision, even the rapid destruction of this Isle that he had adorned with the name of his brothers and sisters. By his cunning, decisiveness, on the strength of the uncanny powers ascribed to him, he had become ruler of this land whose occupants he despised, whose touch repelled him. It tormented him that he must make use of dirty things to help the Broken Melon. Never had his hatred for Wang Lun been so constant, for the man who had allowed all this to pass when he might have prevented it with a small shift of his will.

In the first days after the reversal at the swamp of Talu, Ma served his people better than he knew. He had thought to make a journey back to himself, out of the clutter of daily command. But only with the burning of the monastery did this journey become possible. Ma became a hermit again, without in his role of king becoming aware of it. He gained empathy with vanished incidents on Nank'ou Pass. Through his dreams civet cats ran, sat on the Buddha shelf, flocks of crows waited for his scraps on the steps; and Ma No wondered at this upwelling of memories. Uncouth Wang Lun looked at the golden Buddhas, long since shattered, asked endlessly after a hundred-armed Kuan-yin of rock crystal whose splinters cut the feet of travellers in the vale of micanthus. Against fate the only salvation was through acquiescence; the slaughter at the foot of the mountains, the burning of the monastery once again proved all that. Ma felt that the immensity of this idea and the fruits of these facts were beyond his powers.

The sect was welded together by fate. The joy of the summer months no longer shone over them. Many became conscious only now of the deadly earnest of their sect. Ma radiated a dark glow that imparted itself to them. Yuan, fallen in the battles around the farms, lay under the earth. The Lius kept silent before Ma's authority. Lovely Liang trembled at the glance of this rigid man and thought herself lucky to follow him. Yellow Bell had disappeared.

Once more the body of the sect shivered with an inner sickness. In a village barely eight li from the capital there lived among the Broken Melon a young, strange, handsome brother who, though a charcoal burner by trade, bore himself with enviable refinement and was always ready to help. Like not a few others he had left home out of filial devotion, from a vow to a wandering brother that he would go to the Broken Melon himself if the brother would help his sick father. Now, torn from familiar surroundings, he journeyed with the others to the Western Paradise.

But he was disturbed in the purity and calm of his emotions by a feverish passion for a woman. This woman was a sister, but she found it a struggle to keep her spirit aimed surely towards the clearly seen goal. Of a girlish gentle beauty, a voice that was always husky, dreamily squinting eyes, she was first borne from her father's house at the side of a coarse forty year old dealer in furs, from whom she fled two years later because she thought he had discovered her infidelity. The man fetched her back, she deceived him again and had to leave the town. She was glad to come upon the wandering brothers and sisters; she could indulge the vexing wildness of her body without mortal risk; she almost stumbled headfirst into their lusts.

Then she met the young charcoal burner. She didn't deny him, but soon he drew back from her, desired her no more; grew gloomy. He declared to her one morning, when she came to his smoky billet in front of the village and sang, that he'd given no thought for days to heavenly things, he was in torment and begged her to stay with him and belong to him. The young woman covered her comely face weeping as soon as he began to speak, for she knew already what he would say. But when he finished she looked about to see if anyone was listening, sat in the smoke next to him, put her arms around his neck so that her full cheeks and unsated lips lay beside his smooth skull, and moistened his queue with tears and kisses. Surely he knew his wishes flew in the face of the precious rules, and what did he think he'd do if anyone found out.

Nung slowly turned to her his oval face that had lost all symmetry

under his pain. What would happen if they were found out he didn't know; he didn't want to offend against the precious rules, for that would be a sin against his father; but he didn't know where to turn. The disgusting suicide demon in the wide trousers had fallen upon him, this last night and three evenings ago. "What's the answer, dear sister? How should Brother Nung deal with it?" They sat quietly and without thought in the foul smoke; his sooty hands twined in her black artful locks.

The young woman, though worried for herself, followed him as he wished. She moved in with him at the charcoal burner's that Nung worked for. The patient treetrunk of a man warned the youngsters, but they avoided him.

Meanwhile the year was far advanced; the Isle's inhabitants prepared for the Yü-lan festival, All Soul's Day. Everywhere in the open, swings were set up on which bright threads fluttered. Faded leaves drifted down from the horse chestnut trees. Fresh earth was piled onto graves. The usual hearty feasting began. Women went along every path with catkins behind their ears, so as not to be reborn as yellow dogs. The men strutted down alleyways, sat in the teashops in gold-embroidered jackets and belts and played at dominoes and dice.

Near the temple of the town deity lay the women's burial ground; the women of the Broken Melon had their dead brought there in great state and compassion. As they flocked to the graveyard that festival morning—Ma No tolerated the observance of all folk traditions—some sisters came upon the young woman who was Nung's beloved at the entrance to the burial ground, denied her entry. There were no harsh words; the sisters merely made it plain that she could no longer count as one of them since she was living with Nung as his wife.

The sister ran back home in shame, told Nung, whose knees began to tremble, that her spirit when she died wouldn't find a resting place beside the other sisters, cried that she'd been driven from the circle, that she couldn't go on living so and must return to the sisters. Their host, the tall bent charcoal burner, heard her and

growled, “That’s the way it should be.”

Nung, left alone, occupied himself all day numbly at his coals and in the garden. At night he threw himself fully dressed onto the earth, left his face unwashed, ignored his rice bowl. He took himself one morning to the wall of the women’s graveyard and waited for the girl. When she came past in the rainy evening together with a brother (not having fallen into bottomless misery she could now breathe again), Nung set upon them, shoved the brother in the chest, dragged the shrieking girl behind him by the hair. Villagers ran, tore the sister loose, beat the man.

Nung, on quite the wrong track, slid farther down it. The precious rule forbidding the possession of a wife was taken hard by many in the sect. Speaking openly of it with his many friends the day after the foiled assault, he drew them round to his way of thinking. Workmates from the village joined them. From their lair behind a willow grove, they sent a messenger to Ma No for a dispensation from the precious rule. The three Law Kings had the messenger thrown into gaol. Bent on possessing the young woman—she had fled to Ma No in the capital—during the next four days Nung gathered supporters among villagers, to whom he decried the king as intolerant and cruel, and among brothers no better than he. They congregated in the morning in the streets of the capital to force Ma No into conceding their demands. But the priest-king and his advisers gave Nung a warning and told the men to leave the town and make their own way.

So young Nung, grubby, barefoot, in ragged garments, stormed into the yamen that served as the king’s palace. Standing at the threshold of the open door with his unbound pigtail flapping down the back of his skull, he shouted into the dark chamber where Ma and his three Law Kings were sitting against the wall: Were they going to grant his wish or should he draw his bow. Answered by silence he sent the first arrow close over Ma’s head into the wooden wall, the second passed through the arm of a Law King, then he himself was hit from behind in the shoulder. The arrow wobbled in his flesh, Nung roared. Citizens in the streets had driven away most

of Nung's unruly companions, surrounded the yamen, penned him and a few others up in the courtyard. Nung, snarling about him, was set in the cangue and locked in the town gaol. The Law Kings sentenced him, Ma having brushed the matter from him with indifference, to death by slicing.

Nung knew his spirit was doomed. He played the part of a demon eager to reach the nether world, reviled brothers and sisters he passed on the way to the execution ground, mocked the father he had sacrificed himself for, and at the block was so scornful of the holy sect that the executioner could not carry out the sentence of lingering death, but at the outraged crowd's insistence strangled the impenitent man.

There followed the severe punishment and expulsion of the brothers who had taken part and their accomplices. This disturbance and the loathsome raving symptoms that accompanied it erupted over the Broken Melon like a grievous misfortune. It seemed to many sectarians that as a result of this affliction they were condemned to tear themselves apart. Many crept about dejected, thought of desperate flight to the surrounding countryside, were forlornly weary of life. Others looked on the disturbance as a purifying process unavoidable in a young cause, consoled themselves and each other, tried to look on the bright side.

The marketplaces of the villages and the capital witnessed emotional scenes. In the courtyard of the king's yamen this event occurred repeatedly: a two-wheeled cart drove up, a lady struggled out, tripped to the gong next to the steps and threw herself to the ground. She knelt in front of Ma or one of the Law Kings, denounced home and family and then cursing, in front of all the onlookers, laid one after another on the steps all her bracelets, necklaces, rings, feathers, pulled off all her painted silken garments, ripped underclothes into long shreds, let her hair be loosened by the sisters who embraced her.

When Ma was present at such scenes he covered his eyes with his left hand. Sometimes when the gong clashed he rushed out even before a messenger called him, and sought around the yard amongst

the fervent people. He sought Wang Lun and Yellow Bell.

When a month had elapsed since the founding of the kingdom a festival was held in the capital. This festival has been described many times; poems were composed about it; even Ch'ien-lung alluded to it in some later verses. Almost everything we have is a phantastical distortion of the event.

All work, even military duty on the border, ceased for six double hours. Trumpets blew in the morning on the streets of the capital. They were deep, dreadful, jolting blasts devoid of music, piercing screams of frightened shades, cries for help from the dead to the living, uttered with increasing force so that it seemed the blaring would at any moment become corporeal and fall damply around the shoulders of passers by. The blasts approached, receded, emanated from all around; it seemed the town was surrounded by them.

From the back streets emerged creatures in strange disguise. They appeared from nowhere, sprang from the earth under the noses of the spruce strolling citizens, flitted past the houses, crouched down in front of sedan chairs and dumbly blocked their progress. There was sudden laughter when the apelike brown and black creatures jumped onto the shoulders of sober men, crossed skinny legs on their breasts and, satisfied, with a loud bleat grasped a low gable end and swung free.

In the main street, called Yellow Beam Street, citizens promenaded. Brothers and sisters took over the empty market square and began to make soft music. The fine shrilling sounds of yüeh-ch'in strings rose with a hypnotic sweetness and monotony into the autumn air; the shuang-ch'in, the octagonal guitar, joined in: a chirping, then regular, abrupt chords that formed a chain of golden links, scattered like grains of rice on the soft ground.

While the voices of the sisters swelled and faded in accompanying song, sober promenaders, climbing bowing from their chairs, transformed themselves into playful blue and red Pekinese, ran at the others on all fours, romped on the roadway and howled

comically at the festive music. Here just now a couple stood in polite conversation, leaned shoulder to shoulder in front of a shop; all of a sudden one collapsed, pulled a turtleshell over himself and waddled off. The music continued unperturbed. Bamboo flutes blew; as the poem says: *The notes drew themselves out, supple as silken thread*.

In the streets jugglers, athletes, conjurers, grotesque masks twirled in and out. Clacking, twanging, nasal hornblasts. A lean queueless man, made up all in white, in a long, narrow white gown with a black sash, squatted low on his stool. Around him crouched three grown white tigers that he held by plain coloured leashes. The beasts stretched, scratched the ground with their claws. Suddenly there was a scream, a tumult of people. The tigers made off with great strides, pulling the white man behind them by the leashes. He half flew through the air, his mouth a circle in his fear. They scrambled up to a tiger column at a street corner, sniffed, sat down one beside the other, stayed calmly sitting when a couple of bold youths shoved through, gently patted backs and bellies smooth, their legs tucked in, until they formed a wide white blackdappled tableau of paper in front of their whitepainted master with the black sash, who sculpted his uncannily mobile mouth very slowly into a crooked snout and set one cheek twitching violently so that the flesh seemed to laugh.

While jugglers waked on stilts standing unsupported in the air; athletes balanced bellhung pennants on their teeth; swordsmen lunged at each other in mirrors booths, struck off hands and heads, ran bloodthirstily about with flapping hands in their mouths and outside bowing graciously collected money, there a sly young fellow in a tall red cap sat peering into a wooden cage pointing all the white at the little polished chest inside; a canary trilled in front of it and at his master's call opened a tiny casket with his beak, took out and brought little messages.

Puppets, marionettes danced on smooth boards before inoffensive country people who had strolled into town with their crude fans and bamboo parasols. They gawped at the bunting-draped stands where trained mice and rats crept over carpeted steps, little ladders, ran in pairs in treadmills, jumped through flying rings, pushed mallets

against tin gongs.

A wild commotion encircled roped-off spaces in the markets. Behind the ropes stood heaps of little earthen pots with slits. In the middle of these stockpiles crickets were set to fighting, excited bets were placed on the little creatures.

Every spirit from whom something good could be expected was served in the houses and little temples with offerings and incense; menacing the gongs pealed, drumrolls crashed; the town puffed itself up, with one breath blew evil spirits and hungry and demons from itself. On the doors hung long red scrolls with supplicating figures, messengers bore good wishes from clan to clan. Endless, restless, whipped-up bustle. Sombre dramas were performed in the great teahouses and pleasures houses.

On this day the brothers and sisters were allowed every luxury and pleasure. In many houses they shared the family feast. The more sharpwitted sat in public places, in front of temples, beside them great quantities of rice in bowls, tea, ginseng, noodles, dumplings, told their audiences wonderful stories and played host. The younger, well-formed sisters donned bright expensive silk brocades, gifts from propertied townsmen; their faces were beautifully made up; they played in the theatres, performed strange dances, in the painted houses went willingly around among their working sisters.

Afternoon came. The stallholders, jugglers, hawkers cleared the marketplaces. On tsu-lands at the edge of the town, where inside the walls a spruce wood advanced on the houses, a square prominence had been leveled off. Here where the little dark temple of an ancient virtuous mandarin crumbled, the brothers and sisters of the Broken Melon were to come together. Again the trumpets screeched, ever louder, ever more urgent. The streets emptied, the terrible sounds echoed on the wind, no salvation, no compassion; the town immured behind hard walls of stone.

Against this black backdrop of evergreens the future of the brothers and sisters played itself out. On the town slope, facing the trees, the sectarians sat in long rows; behind, above them townsmen and innumerable peasants. They thronged the flat roofs; their fans

and parasols waved from upper windows and doors. Confused shouts, dense buzzing; from the town isolated squalling gongbeats; over everything the black muteness of the spruce wood. In the blue sky white cloud traces.

The ground began to shake. Horsemen broke through the trees in a long line; looming in a thundering gallop they approached the flat hill facing the town slope, separated into two squadrons, leapt at one another. Some of the onlookers quickly noticed that one troop bore the accoutrements and weapons of an Imperial Banner regiment; yellow with border, led by an officer of high rank, lancers with bamboo lances yards high and triangular field ensigns. From the rooftops the genuine breastshields of the officers—leopards and bears—were pointed out; some called out that these were captured weapons and uniforms, many shouted exultantly that the riders themselves were booty; they were all prisoners from the frontier; there was excitement at the fate of these men. It was in fact a captured Imperial company. The other riders in simple peasant garb: straw hats of enormous circumference, straw sandals, grey tunics; armed indifferently with swords, scythes, flails. They outnumbered the Manchus perhaps ten to one. At first they mingled soundlessly, separated, thundered at one another more menacing, yelled curses as they rode by, then all of a sudden the peasants stormed the enemy and drove them to the wood, where more mounted peasants were waiting. Jubilantly the flushed riders swarmed over the field, brandished their swords, ran beside their mounts and swung themselves with a handspring into the saddle.

Into the midst of their riotous cavorting burst the Manchu prisoners. Now from the ranks of seated brothers twenty, thirty, fifty thinly clad men jumped up, seemed to ask something of an abstracted Ma No, who paid them no attention, then of a Law King, who after a few words nodded assent. These were brothers who offered themselves as fervent sacrifices, who could no longer contain their souls. Quick as lightning they tied up their queues, ran among the peasants; they held fast to the bridles of the horses. Again the troops mingled without contact, but the brothers snatched at the

Manchu lances; some of the runners were struck by hooves and lay writhing on the field. Shrill calls from windows and roofs vibrated over the field and echoed back from the wood; parasols, caps, sashes and scarves were waved; horrified cries could be heard from men who lost their footing in the excitement and tumbled down steps. Women shrieked, clamoured for the enemy. The noise of the throng thickened to a wild roaring that flowed down like a deafening fog into the field.

Now on opposite sides of the square the two hosts halted. The Banner troops had drawn themselves up in a circle; the Manchus gesticulated wildly and called to one another; mocking laughter and quarrelsome words. Two pulled their horses side by side, threw away their lances and wrestled each other from their saddles, crashing to the ground and rolling. As roars of abuse dinned from the town like iron bars poked into a cage, some turned ragebloated faces to the town, set themselves firmly in the stirrups, brandished lances ready for hurling.

The brothers ran over the field, quickly pulled the trampled bodies clear, danced unarmed, bareheaded, barefoot in the pelting forefending “No, no no!” of the onlookers towards the waiting Manchus. The foremost of the brothers leapt at horses, sought to relieve the manbeasts above them of their lances; they were driven off with kicks and blows. When they grabbed bridles, making the horses rear, the two officers issued curt orders; the closepacked square dissolved. Manchus of gigantic strength lifted brothers by the throat like buckets by the handle, slung them at the gallop in front of them and rode over them. None of these onrushing men now recognized the others; they threw themselves, hung with their lances, far over the heads and manes of their straining horses.

A raging blood thirsty murderous horde, mouths, lungs, throats, arms, staring eyes, horsefoam rushed down on them; the thousand fold feverish howling from the town broke suffocatingly on their shoulders. Flashing of swords, creaking flails, long drawn groaning of the speared, axes flying through the air, brothers already dreaming, peasants at their work, death rattles, neighing, dumb

grimaces, iron hands from saddle to saddle, sweat, dust, wet blood in blinded eyes, arrows from the town. At the windows of the houses, on the roofs, on the town slope faltering sobs, breathless gasps, outbreaks of fury, embracing, fainting. Then none of the Manchus was left seated on his horse.

One of the Law Kings, bent over his knees, gave a signal. Drums rolled in front of his place; behind the dark backdrop the blare of trumpets swelled; great swarms of ox carts drove creaking over the field. The battle was over. The field was cleared, horses herded together.

An hour passed; breathing became easier. Gratification lay on the faces of the citizens. Then on the flat hill that lay like a stage in the middle of the field calm peaceful music began to play, a melody that drifted free and always returned. Bamboo tubes and panpipes took it up gravely, cymbals rustled frequently among them and the bronze bell rang; castanets accompanied. A long procession of sisters after a while, sumptuously adorned, with long fluttering red ribbons on snugfitting cloth headdresses, walked out among the men; the silk of their overgarments scraped; they swung rosaries, magic swords and placated the irate spirits of the field. They ranged themselves in front of the hill; faces turned from the town they sang to the orchestra.

All the brothers, sisters and townspeople listened enchanted to the singing and let sweet melancholy smooth down their souls. They were attentive to the music; few, lowering their eyes in delight, recalled the clangorous tumult just past. Hands were unclasped; they sat with their backs to the field, rested their heads. Softly the bronze bell was struck.

There was a shout; those lost in thought sat upright. Masks approached the hill. A new play was beginning. Murmuring arose among the brothers and sisters on the town slope; the words travelled upwards. It was the Eight Immortals who approached.

The brothers who played these figures had not disguised themselves in detail; some wore threadbare clothes under the face masks and emblems and walked barefoot. Climbing up the hill were

old men, with tin clasps around their foreheads instead of a halo.

Chung-li Ch'üan, the whitebeard, held an enormous wooden sword, the other end of it borne by two small boys. An old bent woman fanned him with a fan as big as an unfurled parasol. The old man had obtained the elixir of immortality; he appeared in many guises, he could walk on water; he took his fan and his sword everywhere.

Then came old Master Lu, called the Guest of the Cave, his mask a benevolent smiling face; he drew a cart behind him with a low stool on it and a trestle with a red towel, a wobbling porcelain basin, a broad razor.

Ts'ao Kuo-ch'iu and the others followed; the last two riding sidesaddle on mules.

They placed themselves on the flat hilltop in a circle, waved towards the music and the brothers and sisters; some of the trembling old men tumbled onto the sand.

A happy murmur from the town. At a fast trot a pony and carriage started out of the woods. In the two-wheeled carriage that looked like a hollowed out jadestone a bearded dwarf sat holding the reins; behind him trotted a second equipage, more slowly. From this seashell-carriage gazed a young girl, placidly holding aloft a tall stalk like green seaweed; a long leafcase hung down.

At the sight of this the murmuring rose to a roar, a loud shouting, an "Ah!" that rippled over the rows of seated figures, tumbled through windows, rolled across the roofs. This was the chi-plant, that bestowed immortality. The townsmen and peasants turned agitatedly back and forth between the spectacle and the sight of the sectarians below. They realized that the most esoteric of mysteries was being performed on the hilltop; they hoped to strengthen their sensation of holiness by glimpsing the brothers and sisters.

For the latter everything was real and unfeigned. They laughed and stretched out hands; they yearned, and tears stood in their eyes. The Immortals waved from the hill.

Now the music stopped; it set up again at once in a Singular springy, jubilant manner; tom-toms and cymbals joined in. And to

this music a festive train approached from the woods. Innumerable yellow-jacketed forerunners, tablet bearers, gongbeaters. On the shoulders of eight bearers rested a bedragoned palanquin splendid with bunting, yellow curtains drawn shut. Two smaller sedans and a rearguard followed.

The Holy Mother of the Western Mountains was being borne to her kingdom.

On the hill along the seated rows deepest silence reigned; then a general scraping and rustling: the backs and pigtails of innumerable people touching foreheads to the ground twelve times.

No end to the Holy Mother's procession. Behind the palanquin men, women exulted; they waved scarlet threads, ran barefoot hither and thither, leaped past each other, danced, rolled playfully in the sand, carried each other on shoulders, men embraced women, men carried boys in their arms. At first the singing seemed ragged, confused; then as it approached you could make out songs of seduction that the sisters often crooned to the yüeh-ch'in.

Some jumped up from the seated brothers and sisters, ran to each other, called with broken voices, pointed, called names, names of dead believers fallen in the attacks, at the burning of the monastery. It was them, their masks, they recognized them all, every one; they hollowed to them, the masks hollowed back, called to them, enticed them on. The sisters untied their hair and flaunted their locks. Brothers, beside themselves, clapped hands to their eyes, wept in each other's arms, flung off their tunics, their sandals, their hats in order to reach them. Down below the masks of the dead brothers and sisters gathered around the palanquin of the yellow Queen of the Western Paradise, who had drawn back the curtains, revealed her painted regal face to all sides.

A monstrous cry tore loose from the multitude in the town. The eyes of all those above were open wide, fumbling hands sought to tear away the purple veil that excitement had laid dazzling across their vision. They exhaled in fear.

And the last of the brothers below dragged in their arms something that left behind long black trails of blood; other brothers

hastened back to the woods, on their arms fresh stiff motionless corpses of men. They stumbled up the hill with their dreadful load. These were the dying and dead brothers who had just now sacrificed themselves.

And when, singing to the music, they laid down their terrible deathcraving burden in the throng before the palanquin of the glorious Queen, now risen from her seat, when the musicians aghast threw down their instruments and stretched out on the ground, then Ma No could not restrain himself. Loudly he cried out, opened his fists towards the hill, ran down the slope to the flat ground. The brothers and sisters rose from their seats, in a moment the seats, windows, doors, roofs of the town were empty. Everyone stormed down the slope, knocked one another over, let themselves be trampled without noticing it. They burst through the iron fence, tore it out along its whole length; the brothers, sisters and townspeople flooded unhindered over the bloodsated plain to the hill, which they surrounded shouting senselessly. Like drowning men they pulled themselves up it, like drowning men who sought to emerge from the sea to the gentle smile of the Queen of the Western Paradise.

This emotional day saw weighty events of great consequence on the northern and eastern frontier of the little kingdom: the victorious assault of the provincial army.

In the night, country dwellers fled to the capital. During a renewed battle some days later the routed forces of the kingdom, who had taken up positions in front of the town, were completely annihilated. The storm at once broke over the town, which was empty of soldiers. Townsmen and sectarians tumbled in disorderly flight south from the burning town; decimated they arrived about four thousand strong outside the walled city of Yangchou-fu.

Those still carrying arms, desperate, surprised the gate guard, cut down the unsuspecting garrison of two hundred men and took control of a substantial portion of the city, the relic of an earlier Mongolian settlement, that lay within the walls, separated from the rest of the city by a wall. Here the remnant of the defeated band barricaded themselves in.

The holy kingdom was lost. The brothers and sisters went down into the town proper, and thanks to an upwelling of sympathy for the Broken Melon the besieged were supplied by the town with provisions, although no armed support was forthcoming and accommodation in the houses of the lower town was denied them.

While units of the provincial army prepared for further pursuit and slowly concentrated forces around the city of Yangchou-fu, Wang Lun's emissaries, the fig sellers, hurried to the tents of the generals commanding the troops. In every letter was written: He was Wang Lun, leader of the Truly Powerless, who distanced themselves from this latest rebellion. He requested the generals to delay their preparations for one or two days and to receive him, Wang Lun from Hunkang-ts'un, for an important conference. He would come alone. For credentials he would send into the tent of the assembled generals his sword, Yellow Leaper, which bore on its blade seven inlaid panels of brass and below the pommel a lotus blossom of inlaid silver wire. The generals showed each other their letters, tried to guess what it was all about, and agreed to grant the notorious man an interview. At the same time, in case his request should have evil intent, they took precautions to have him cut down on his way back. On the day of the interview, in good time, the generals received warnings from friendly sources they had taken into their confidence not to lay violent hands on the man, and emphatic advice to go along with whatever plans he proposed. Hints of secret guilds standing behind Wang gave force to the advice.

The four generals were quartered in the magistracy of a village outside Yangchou. In the wretched yamen, at midday, they received the sword as arranged in a case of figs, handed to a door guard by a local tradesman. One hour later the guard reported that a ragged fellow in military uniform was standing outside, who claimed he'd handed in his visiting card an hour before. The generals, after ordering him to be searched for weapons, had him admitted.

Wang Lun, a giant, with his thin clothing and empty dangling hands appeared even taller in the room where the generals sat like judges behind a table, not coming forward to greet their guest. His

hard serious face lit up for a moment; he leaned on the doorpost, pulled the door shut, said in a sly tone, “Here’s Wang Lun from Hunkang-ts’un, and you’re the generals of the Son of Heaven, one, two, three, four. Greetings to the old gentlemen. It was smart of you not to greet Wang Lun; for after all the old gentlemen are guests in this land, and Wang Lun regrets he didn’t meet the gentlemen when they first arrived in his country and show them reverence.”

“Sit here beside us, Wang Lun, leave the door alone. There are no eavesdroppers.”

“Oh, I’m not afraid. The men who eavesdrop are my brothers.”

“You sent us a case of figs with letters in. We wrote to you. You’ve established your credentials with the sword. What do you want?”

“I don’t think I’m mistaken, generals, if I believe I know what you want. Here in this district. You want to advance on Yangchou after your victory, and destroy my former brother Ma No and wipe him from the earth.”

“That will happen before the moon is full.”

“Wang doesn’t doubt the old gentlemen’s skill in strategy and the battlereadiness of their troops. He believes in the fate that Ma No has challenged and that’s about to break over him. Over him, and over you, a decade sooner or a decade later. So you’re going to destroy the Broken Melon and Ma No?”

“You heard us. The courteous man who regrets not having greeted us on our arrival in his country still hasn’t explained why he sent us the sword and the letters.”

“So you’re going to destroy the Broken Melon and Ma No. You of course are better than them and will be reborn as higher beings. But that’s of no help at the present. There are five thousand of you, well armed; they don’t even lift a bow, not even a stick or stone. You’re brave enough to cut down defenceless brothers and sisters, after they’ve atoned for their crimes a hundred, a thousandfold. You know who drove them to take over the monastery by the lake; the well informed gentlemen have some idea who mobilized the murderous attack on the Broken Melon in the T’aihang. It’s no secret to the great commanders which Prefect it was who sent the constables and

lictors to the monastery after the Broken Melon for—for what? The brothers and sisters didn't attack anyone. They stretched out their necks to the cowardly swords. And they sat there, in the prayer-halls of the monastery that the Chanpo yielded up willingly in the face of their need, and let themselves be broiled, roasted, grilled, stewed by the constables the Prefect sent to finish off the bloodbath on the T'aihang. What's to happen now? They let themselves be carried away by the rebels in the district; they shouldn't have grown desperate, they should have let themselves be murdered, for desperation too calls up fate. They should have atoned for it. I think, Wang Lun from Hunkang-ts'un thinks, enough is enough. There's been enough of playing fate, wise gentlemen. Laws against heresy are no reason for murder and killing, not reason enough. The land is peaceable. Seek enemies where you like, but not in my country, my honourable guests."

"Our kind host has, of course, a great army behind him, since he speaks so slightingly of us foreigners. But he overestimates us. Who are these insignificant creatures sitting here in front of him? They have orders from the Ministry in the Imperial City, they have instructions from the Tsungtu of Chihli. They could agree to everything their kind host says—who won't respect us even while he sits with us. They all have written papers in their pouches that beat with a stronger pulse than their own living hearts."

"You gentlemen aren't warlike, Wang Lun's not warlike, only the papers are warlike. But I know that even papers cry war only against enemies. So if the Broken Melon ceased to be enemies of your strips of paper—"

"Which will be the moment they cease to exist."

"Or when they disperse and become indistinguishable from the people. That was why I sent emissaries with the figs to the old gentlemen. Let me ask you: do you have orders in your sashes to be victorious, or to crush the Broken Melon?"

"According to our papers and in our own view the two are one and the same."

"I shan't sit down with you in case you think I've come in

friendship to ask you a favour. The two are not the same, as your most acute perceptiveness must tell you. I'm no friend of the Broken Melon; but I want to spare the persecuted, the misguided from the worst your butcher soldiers, your privileged executioners can do. They shall cease to exist. They shan't attain the higher things, the highest things that they were led astray pursuing. And that will be enough for you."

"How has Wang Lun the power to do what he promises? And if he has the power, why didn't he exercise it sooner? Then he'd have no need to bewail the bloodbath, the burning of the monastery, could spare us his accusations."

"I'm not above fate. I'm not promising you too much, and nothing beyond my ability. Now, at this moment, I can act. You'll see how it goes. In three days I'll have measured off the path of my power. Then I shall stand again before the four gentlemen, here at this doorpost, and report."

"Until then we must hold off our troops, you mean? We hear reports, Wang Lun, that you possess great, the people say supernatural, powers. How they set about reducing a fortress will be of interest to seasoned soldiers. I'll tell you what we've decided. We shan't lose any time on your account. That could cost us our heads, and they're worth more to us than the Western Paradise. We'll draw all the troops under our command up to a particular line, which will be clear to you in two days, all around Yangchou. However, we shan't begin storming the city before the end of the third day. That way neither you nor we are compromised. If you stand at that doorpost on the fourth day and report to us what we shall already know, then we'll have learnt something."

"Wang Lun wanted nothing more from the old gentlemen. He would like his sword returned to him, in a case of figs, at the outer door."

The generals stood up. Wang made a restraining gesture with his long arms and ran down the steps.

The gate of the Mongolian town of Yang stood open all day for six double hours. Ma No's house lay at one corner of the huge grass

grown marketplace. On the evening of the tenth day of their stay in Yang, a wet late autumn day, the brother on sentry duty bent through the doorway, ran into the silent house: a man wanted to speak to Ma No.

Wang Lun threw straw hat and straw cloak down on the ground in the half dark room, removed the sword from around his neck, with bows and handshakes greeted Ma, who sat on a stool and nodded coolly to him.

“I’ve come to you, Ma No. We haven’t met since spring.”

“Spring?”

“Last spring.”

“At the swamp of Talu. You didn’t need fireflies this time to find me out. You only had to follow your nose, this time. Even the dead who die in hope of Paradise stink.”

“The last time I was your guest I was suffering with my knee. It’s healed now. How goes it with my host?”

“As it goes with anyone who, strolling along a path, a not quite safe path, loses one ankle after the other, one round gob of blood after another, one strip of skin after another. No doubt my guest will ask next how I feel about it. Pleasant, comfortable: what else can you expect if you travel with so little baggage. And it makes for a really light step.”

“There were a lot of you, pulling south out of Chengting.”

“Then I swung back to the north. There were more and more of us. I became king of a realm whose goodness was surpassed by only one thing, namely its weakness. Then I came here. You haven’t totted up all the dead yet with your nose, all the brothers and sisters. We shovelled two hundred of each into five graves. Now there are few of us. And now Wang Lun sits beside me, to draw the line beneath his reckoning.”

“I’m not reckoning, Ma. Don’t make me responsible for fate.”

“Nor you me.”

“You’d better tell yourself that, Ma No. A man who fells a tree can be killed by it. I don’t want to go on about that in front of my teacher. I want to talk of myself, if he’ll allow me. What I want to

say to you is obscure even to me and leaves me empty of all feeling. You know it already. On my wanderings from Hunkangts'un to western Shantung I went hungry and thirsty, endured many insults. In Chinan-fu, that great city, as assistant to the bonze T'o I cheated, stole, profaned. I roamed around Chihli, you saw me on Nank'ou Pass, it was going badly with me. I bowed my head, you swore to me we wouldn't strive against fate; there'd been enough of that. I'd reached my goal. Many had suffered the same and thought the same. I brought them to a resolution. Now I've finished my story. You swore, you with your ignorant heart. Now when Ma No sits with his hand over his eyes he no longer looks as if his heart knew just about everything. What, Ma No—tell me, if you once loved me—what's to happen now?"

Ma took his hand from his eyes and looked long at Wang, who moved closer.

"There's a certain difference between my friend Wang, when he came to a resolution on Nank'ou Pass, and me."

"What difference? There's no difference. Only that, then, I longed with my whole soul for someone like a double to stand there beside me and make everything easier. I've worked it out now; I understand you. I'm a wide mouthed sack for you to throw in whatever you want."

"I don't need any widemouthed sack."

"You're my brother, Ma No. You're the only one who ever became my brother. When I think back on Su-ko: what was Su-ko compared to what I feel for you? You flay me, you strangle me when you turn away. Whenever did two men, brother Ma No, suffer so alike as you and me? If you don't need me, I, who love you, need you. You shouldn't sit so quietly brooding—oh, I've done that as well-you shouldn't fidget so with your fingers. You ought to turn to me, brother Ma No, and look at me. I'm the only man who can endure your gaze. I'm your guest, I want to come to you! How can I speak convincingly to you? How can I make you trust me?"

Wang had seated himself on a stool next to Ma No, his arms around Ma's shoulders. Ma too laid his arm on Wang's shoulder and

sat unmoving. Then he said in a slow, suppressed tone:

"I never thought, brother, dear brother Wang, that you could wish me so well. Let me just think for a moment. I was talking of the difference, yes, the difference. Let me explain it to you. However bad a way you were in then, I'm dearly in a worse now, but you've become happier. You had a choice, you came to a resolution. I'm already beyond that point. I've no more choices open to me. Everything's happened to me already. Everything in and around this city has run its course. All that's lacking is an external movement, a gesture, a seal. All that can happen here now is a thing of no consequence."

"Wang Lun hasn't yet told his brother why he sought him out in this Mongolian town."

"You're offering us help."

"Perhaps help, Ma. I've made a pact with the leaders of the army that's moving against Yangchou and is already surrounding you. For three days there'll be no direct action against you. For these three days I have a free hand to parley with you and your people."

"I'm grateful for this ungrateful task, since it has brought my brother Wang to me."

"I won't allow the executioners and bloodsoaked soldiers to fall on you and sate their bestial cruelty. You were my brothers and sisters, and you, Ma, I mean it sincerely, have again become my brother. You mustn't fall into their hands. You must scatter. That's what I have to tell you and advise you. You won't be angry at what I say. You must go out and have the bell rung and say: Dreadful fate has trapped us till we can only hop like crickets in a jar. No need to judge whether we took the right path. We took the right path. Now we must part, and roam, so that we're not felled like calves. Then you let them all go; they'll heave a deep breath when you tell them, and no one will hinder them as they go. And you yourself, brother Ma No, you know now where you must go."

Ma No smiled a peaceful smile. "Won't you ring the bell yourself and speak to the brothers and sisters?"

"They're your followers."

“Not any more. Just go to the marketplace, call them together, speak, it’ll be a lesson for you. They don’t want speeches, neither do I. They’re lost, plain and simple. Like me.”

“You’re weary, Ma. All of you seem strengthless, weak. I beg you, implore you, Ma No, dear brother, I lay my forehead on the ground before you: go with me to the marketplace, ring the bell, speak and point to me. I love you all; perhaps my words haven’t been strong enough to show you what you are to me. For all the long months of this terrible year I’ve suffered for you and yearned for you, more than a lover for his little boy. You mustn’t let it hang over me that you sent me away and let it all pass as you know it must, the bestial horde slaughtering the good hopeful brothers and sisters. Are you prepared yet, Ma No, are you prepared? You yourself will be stolen away from me, you the jewel in my soul. You’re sending me forlorn out into the world, and I don’t have enough hands to sacrifice for you all. Don’t stand there so limp, act with me, help me this once.”

“How you bore into me, Wang. How you honour me. I was never honoured like this as king of my precious, precious isle. To have won you does me a deal of good. But I can’t do anything, Wang.”

“Why can’t my brother do anything?”

“The thousand slain brothers and sisters don’t allow it. All of us know that. The cheated ghosts would never give us a peaceful hour. They mayn’t have been prepared; we are. We’ll put everything right again. We’ll draw them on, take them with us from their roamings. And there can’t be any other ending now. I don’t want any other ending. We’re forged into one circle, dear brother Wang.”

Wang, stunned, threw himself heavily to the ground.

“What message shall I take from you to the Western Paradise, Wang? That you loved us, that you showed us the Way.”

“You won’t take any message from me. You must stay here, you must all stay here.”

“We don’t fear the horde.”

“The soldiers—!”

Wang writhed upright; pinpoints flashed in his glaring eyes. He stood, taking deep breaths, staring at the ground. Then huskily he

said:

"I shall go. You may be right. Is my sword there? Where did I throw my Yellow Leaper, dear brother?"

Ma picked it up, hung it around Wang's neck.

"One message I shall not take, brother Wang: that you run around behind a Yellow Leaper."

They embraced. Ma still smiled. "And how long will it be before I see my brother Wang from Hunkang-ts'un in the Western Paradise?"

When Wang stood in the dark marketplace alone and looked about him he knew for sure: soldiers of the generals of the Tsungtu of Chihli won't storm the walls of the Mongolian town.

He felt his way along streets until he reached the outer wall. He slunk into the little unroofed yard of a ruined cottage, threw himself down to sleep in a shed. Very early, after a terrible night, he departed the town.

Among the shrunken population of the erstwhile kingdom that now thronged the Mongol quarter of Yangchou-fu were three hundred peasants and townsfolk. The walls and watchtowers of the town were in a lamentable state, but the people, having enlisted the aid of fellow guildsmen from the Lower Town, set quickly to closing breaches in the stonework, deepening the dried up moat outside the wall and filling it with water, procuring bows, arrows, wooden shields and piling them in the watchtowers. Behind the ironbraced gates they heaped great stone blocks that they dragged from a village one li outside the town, to render the gate impassable in an assault.

These hardworking, quite unadventurous men and lads were by no means exceptionally fond of fighting; indeed they had no real occasion to be shut up in the town with the sectarians, but they made common cause with them from a certain pious self-interest. That provincial troops should fall upon sectarians seemed to them monstrous: a terrible vengeance was inevitable. To their way of thinking it could only be a matter of time before the brothers and

sisters, tormented beyond bearing, unleashed their sinister subterranean powers. Until then it was best to keep in with them, secure for oneself a part of their power. They were spurred on, too, by a feeling of the importance of their role. Often they discussed the chances of gaining back the old kingdom, or a new one. It was only a matter of convincing the Son of Heaven of the Tsungtu's baseness or of unclogging widespread support among the people. For if the Son of Heaven should look with favour on the Tsungtu's conduct, the Pure Dynasty's oft asserted antipathy for the people would become obvious.

While these men—former salt boilers, carters, coolies—built and dug and by their determined behaviour drew the Lower Town to their side, the brothers and sisters recovered from their terror. Their wounds healed, the paralysis of their desperation wore off. They mulled over the terrible blows they had suffered, strove to regain their feet. Since they could not stray beyond the walls they lapsed into complete inactivity. Sat in the streets, the squares, in a fine large temple to the Pox Goddess, on the earthworks, waited. At morning and evening they gathered in the marketplace.

Ma No stood before them in a mud coloured gown. The little bent motionless man with the receding forehead. They prayed. The crowd threw an idolatrous reverence around Ma No like a restraining leash. To them he seemed instinct with power, a guarantor of what must come. Wang Lun's name had a defunct sound; no one knew if he was still alive.

Lovely Liang-li had survived the rout. Mutely she had long begged Ma's forgiveness. She strove fiercely to unharness her thoughts from worldly things, to merge completely with the holy. There was always something lurking between, a chasm yawned in her: an emptiness, a constriction of the abdomen, a gagging and choking that sucked her downwards. She thought of holy things only through a human medium. She came to them only on these wheels. She shook herself, ran from herself, struggled with herself about Ma No.

Suddenly, bewildered and quite uncomprehending, she recalled what had happened before she left home. She could have sworn to

herself that it wasn't her. Her father, child, husband rose dimly before her, memories that might have come from a story book, were it not for the power they had of causing Liang to turn away in dull torment as soon as they appeared. A twinge in her teeth, a bleak scurrying feeling in her jaw warned Liang of their impending appearance.

Since the days by the swamp of Talu the brothers and outsiders had craved forgetfulness through passion, and she had not drawn back from her holy duty. She possessed no organ of desire. But since the burning of the monastery, when she had ridden together with Ma No, answering some restlessness in her body she often embraced a brother and found transient inward peace. In the Mongolian town her vehemence grew precipitately. She recalled her illness following the birth of her child, was tormented by an urge to weep, flail her arms, groaned and wandered without knowing why. She often hankered after home, spurned it. Prayer formulae, immersion in the prescribed ecstasies disgusted her, as she shamelessly proclaimed a thousand times out loud by day and moaning by night. Potions, ashes, exorcisms were attempted by way of cure. Then a coarse peasant she had taken up with some days past dragged the screaming woman out of the faceloorning night to Ma No. Who succeeded with a few words and handpasses over mouth and breast. She overcame the crisis. Quite soothed, pale and thin she assumed like a physical talisman some of Ma No's characteristics, his absent gaze, the protecting gesture of the left hand in front of the eyes, his mouth gasping for breath.

One of the Lius, the elder, was still alive. The sceptical Little Third, in an uncontrollable transport at the festival in the capital, was one of those brothers who had let themselves be butchered by the Manchu prisoners. The tragedy had made a joker of the elder Liu. He still carried his little pot of cinnabar at his belt, showed it to everyone he saw, ridiculed himself. When laughter echoed through the narrow alleys of the Mongol town, there was Liu at a doorway with a dead rat, a discarded felt sole, between his fingers, making comic funeral speeches. Or he would swing himself across the street

on a loose overhanging roof beam and pin his portrait on it. This man was certain they'd secure themselves a new kingdom more splendid than the last, and their souls would gain that lofty paradise with one great bound. The persecutions they'd suffered were caused by envy; you couldn't blame the Emperor for being envious, and the sectarians had no reason to complain: a man who travels with a bright lantern attracts robbers.

In a corner of the empty marketplace, in the little house, Ma No sat.

He was completely wrapped up in himself. His arrogance was a blast of trumpets, whose menacing violence shatters the earth. A flapping Imperial banner unfurled within him. Ma strolled around this banner. He let no one approach, for he wanted only to listen to the banner. Wang Lun had believed Ma ready for the hard lessons of fate. But fate did not assail the priest. He himself drew misfortune on with grasping arms, like a madman who no longer knows food from poison. He proudly gulped down a misfortune that could have had no business with him. He did not unravel himself. He was a hunk of meat, and sunned himself. The things that ran past him had no smell and no colour. In the background something tossed and turned: the Western Paradise he stretched his dessicated hand towards. Relentless, smooth, he went to gather in his guilt.

He stayed there turned to stone. His pride flapped like an Imperial banner. He believed Wang Lun had become his convert. The land within the Four Seas had never seen the like of the Broken Melon.

Then there howled minutes of terrible self-laceration, when he stood revealed to himself as the errant monk of P'ut'o-shan, the violent ecstatic in need of correction. He peeled away his skin, uncoiled the bundles of white nerves, cut a ghastly resume of his life: standing on an unsteady lurching spot, wallowing around his own skull after security—amidst human sacrifice, the razing of whole cities. Nothing had been accomplished; he was dragging it all down with him to ruin. P'ut'o stood like a fortress he couldn't take as he panted past it. The horror of this idea swept over him. He had meddled with fate. There was nothing in all that had happened,

nothing to find but filth, corruption, a vain gamble. The thousands out there: no end of unfortunates; more beggars and criminals by the thousand in the vast land. And he like them: footing lost, into the cesspit, gulping slime into the lungs—so stupid, so stupid, deserving no sympathy, laughable.

In such anguish Ma No flung himself about for sweatdrenched minutes. Then his arms and legs came together with a start at a hammering outside, tramping of the gate guard, crackling of fire from the Lower Town. He sighed free of his brooding, slipped off into the marketplace. Sisters sang. The women cast reverent glances: calm trusting eyes. There were no more fine jewels, no bridal flowers. Violins and guitars trampled in the mire. Girls, the poor ones, no longer turned themselves inside out, spread their gospel. They'd kept nothing for themselves, yet the danger was not averted. They'd kept their necks intact; surely they would make it. Such was fate, and therefore good. They were like water, that moulds itself to any jar. Even that wasn't enough to let them live.

Ma No slunk past brothers who jumped up from their torpid squatting, turned grubby, emaciated faces to him, surrounded him reverently. What nightshades beset him. P'ut'o with its slavish ideas had worked itself into his brain, after all these decades still wouldn't let its servant go. Here they followed stricter paths, the hardest path of all. The naked deadly horror of existence had forced itself on them; they'd accepted it without running away, like holy Siddhartha, the Crown Prince, had experienced everything for themselves. If the Western Paradise should open, they and he would enter. The Imperial banner fluttered over their path. They sped to the summit like arrows.

He sank onto the wide wall, under his shoulders. Somewhere in that plain Wang Lun roamed. Lost to his own teaching.

Here fire sizzled. They let themselves be driven, couldn't even swim any more. Wu-wei triumphed.

Everything heaped up over the Mongolian town. Banner upon banner! Ghostly pulses throbbed through the little town.

The key to the golden gate was being pressed into their hands. All

around bodies sat still as corpses. One puff and they collapsed. Anyone with the Tao in him has no wish to see, to taste, to hear. Churlishly turns his body aside. Flees.

And really. The Mongolian town lay in a black, hot ecstasy of prayer. Rigid possessed torsoes cringed in alleys, deaf, blind.

The day after Wang Lun visited the Mongol town two apothecary's assistants laboured in the long courtyard of their house in a large village south of the town. The elder, nearer the gate, shovelled charcoal into a little iron stove. On it steamed a broad, deepbellied porcelain basin. The thin white fumes of the charcoal escaped through a spout at the side; the medicine stove, smoking, looked like a giant teapot. A finely domed head turned slowly on the assistant's short, scrawny body. He had thick flabby cheeks, nose sunk between them. Lips strove by their thickness to emerge from under them. He was a close fellow, highly regarded by his master. He was an adherent of Wang Lun's, but unsuited to the wandering life. His face was stolid, but when he glanced up phlegmatically from his work he betrayed himself: it was evident that something stirred in him that would not let him be, gave no peace.

Upwind from the smoke the younger assistant sat astride a stool by the wall of the house, trod the wheel of a treadmill. The wheel crushed dried herbs to powder in a flat wooden tray.

The elder apothecary was trudging into the house to fetch a fine hair sieve—he intended to make from rabbit's liver a decoction for plethora and irascibility—when the gate opened and a tall beggar stood beside the medicine stove.

The assistant called, Please to wait outside. The man walked right up to him, pushed back his straw hat, grasped the assistant by the shoulder reassuringly as, recognising Wang, he was about to prostrate himself. They whispered a few words; with loud blessings the importunate beggar thanked the assistant for the cash he drew from his belt.

An hour later the assistant was walking with Wang over the wild

overgrown hills and valleys to the west of the village. Wang left him alone. The apothecary searched.

The landscape was swampy. Broad peat bogs fringed it. On the low hills yellowed kaoliang stalks and sprawling ferns. The path over the higher hills was dark, so thickly were the evergreen oaks clustered. Closemeshed shrubbery obstructed progress. This was the domain of the little bright boys, so called from the profusion of gaily coloured mushrooms.

Between massive trunks, on the ground, lurked the puffball with the greeny-white cap: pretty white ruffs hung about its throat; so as not to touch the oozy damp soil it wore a delicate toecap, a shoe no thicker than skin. The little apothecary, wide blue simple-pouch at his breast, scurried down a slope where red flashed and the fly agaric flaunted its purple pomp. Many caps were dotted with little warts, white dots exuding a viscous, glassy substance. The collector broke off a large number of them, threw them into his pouch. Not far away among the weeds grew the saffron milkcaps, their heads covered with broad brick red depressions; from their caps brown-white veils fluttered, seemingly torn to shreds by the wind. When he snapped the sterns a slimy latex oozed out and stuck to his fingers. He stuffed his oval pouch full, until juice trickled through it.

Came in the afternoon back to the apothecary's, where he withdrew to his room. Then with the help of his companion he carried the little stove over the step into the room and set to work with the door closed, the window opened just a little.

He threw into the seething water in the basin a handful of mushrooms cut into little pieces; after a short time, indicated precisely by an hourglass, lifted the basin using wooden handles, poured the viscous brown brew with the mushrooms through a fine strainer into a wooden pail. He emptied the strainer into a second pail. Again he brought the water in the basin to the boil, poured off the mushroom broth, strained it. When he had boiled up all the mushrooms, he began to pound the retained pieces to a pulp with a wooden mortar, flushed them into the basin, boiled them for a long time and again filtered them. The residue in the strainer he packed

into a thin pouch which he squeezed over the big pail containing the liquor. Then he flung the fibrous pulp in the pouch into a rubbish bin.

Now began weary work on the liquor. On the stove and on the hearth in the corner of the room, where a kettle hung from an iron hook, the brown liquid was slowly evaporated. Holding his breath he tended the little fires in the stove and under the hearthplate. Then, after opening the window wide, he returned to his work in the pharmacy, mixing officinal pills. From time to time he straddled back to the room, poured more liquid from the pail into the basin and the kettle. Bustled about all night between the pharmacy and his room until morning. When the liquor was reduced to syrup he emptied the contents of the kettle into the basin. Not until early morning, when he went back to the room for the last time, were the contents of the basin ready. The juice was now sticky, dark brown; formed threads on the stirring spoon.

The assistant spent a long time inspecting and sniffing the result. Then he fetched from the pharmacy a sack of black powdered charcoal and some whitish earth, shook them in stirring, poured on a layer of hot water and filled a tall glass jar with the black liquid. Barely an hour later a white and a brown layer had separated out at the bottom of the jar, brown transparent water above them with which, through a narrow wooden funnel, the assistant carefully filled to the brim two gourd flasks, tall big-bellied vessels. After some thought he divided the contents among six little earthenware jars that he stopped tight, hung on cords around his shoulders. Day had not yet broken when the yard gate creaked. The assistant with his jars left house and village behind.

While the apothecary had been botanising in the domain of the little bright boys, there was unceasing turmoil at the north and west gates of the Lower Town of Yangchou. Wheelbarrows entered in a long train, merchants with wives and children on foot, wide covered travelling wagons, a sailcart that had come a great distance. Piping, gongbeats; the gate was barred for a short period; a mandarin’s green palanquin was borne slowly out followed by a horde of

retainers. The high official was taking the delightful autumn air. The gate guards with their short thick cudgels set about great half-naked youths who ran begging behind the retainers.

Before noon a crowd of traders passed into the town, cringing before the burly guard with his sickleshaped halberd. Once inside they separated after a few streets.

One of them carried a gallows contraption from which queuestrings dangled; around his chest he wore a blue cloth on which black characters advertised the virtues of his acclaimed queuestrings.

A few, brandishing loud wooden clappers, sold betelnut cakes that they carried cut up in slabs on trays hanging from their necks.

Others lugged narcissi in buckets.

One by one they entered a busy soup kitchen next door to a large concern hiring sedan chairs and wedding paraphernalia, and sat together. A large, rather bent man with a poorly shaven skull sat with them; he placed his bellshaped wooden chest, painted in black stripes, under the table in front of him. He dealt in human hair. This was Wang Lun.

They had hot broth poured from great porcelain kettles into their shallow bowls. As warm flourcakes were served, Wang and the string seller stood up. They mingled with the customers thronging the entrance to the kitchen, conversed politely. They enquired about the prospects for selling their wares in the town, asked about other businesses, guilds. Wang recalled an old friend who had once earned good money carrying water in this town and then settled in Peking as a hirer of boats; he asked casually where the water carriers lived and where he could find one to speak to. When Wang and the string seller had ascertained that the water carriers frequented a soup kitchen two doors down, they excused themselves from their table and went there.

This establishment was quiet, for the water carriers were busiest around midday. Wang and his companion sat in the middle of the room, guzzled little meat dumplings and drank weak tea. The courteous host stood near, enquired after their health, was grateful

for the honour of their patronage.

At that moment one of his regular customers stomped over the wooden boards, three others behind him. They clapped hands as they entered, beat them together over their shoulders; their fingers were numb from grasping halters. The host started to show them to seats; but Wang as the stranger stood up, introduced himself and his companions, invited the water carriers to sit at his table; spoke of his friend, whom none of them recalled; only one of them remembered dimly having heard of someone of their trade who'd set up in Peking or near Peking as a boat hirer; but that must have been a long time ago. In the course of the conversation the two strangers, who had clearly been around, found out how the trade was organized here, whether earnings didn't vary a great deal depending on the district. They found that this was of course the case; in certain quarters of the town and certain streets it was the devil's own work to earn a penny. For example, the ten of them who served the Upper Town, where there were no wells, had to be on the go all day, their horses worn out in no time; and the income? Every two days that beat was handed over to another bunch of water carriers, because the people up there were so unbelievably poor. You couldn't let them die of thirst, though actually the magistrate had let it be known that it might go ill with the water carriers later, on account of their charity.

Wang was pleased to learn that two of his table companions belonged to the party supplying water to the Mongolian town that day and the next. He and the string seller attached themselves to these men as they led their horses to the walled well from which they drew water in giant buckets. The other eight wagons, already full, were squealing down the street. Wang learned the names and lodging places of his new acquaintances; as he watched them scooping water explained that theirs seemed a fine peaceful trade compared to his wretched one, having to deal with all those barbers and stuck-up flower women who never had any cash handy when it was time to pay. He couldn't get his friend out of his mind, the boat hirer in Peking. He wanted to see, he and his friend, if the trade

suited them. He wanted to give it a try, just for a day; maybe it wasn't as simple as he thought.

The two water carriers laughed out loud at this suggestion. And who would pay them the wages they'd forego for such a lesson?

That, said Wang Lun, was of course his responsibility; he'd see they weren't out of pocket for their instruction and cooperation. Of course, if they agreed—and to accommodate a poor man like this was really something extraordinary—he'd pay them an average day's takings, though they should realize he was a poor man himself and didn't have much to spare. But their trade, after all, was more secure than his miserable one.

After much toing and froing Wang reached agreement with them. The simplest thing, it was decided, would be for them to join with the other eight carriers presently on the barely paying Mongolian town beat. They would instruct Wang and his companion on the work arrangements, feeding the animals, stabling; he would put down a deposit equivalent to an average day's takings in the Lower Town—note, the Lower Town; and would take over deliveries to the Mongolian town for the whole of the next day. He would be responsible for any damage to wagon, harness or animals. And only, of course, if the other eight were agreeable.

Wang hummed and ha'ed about the price, couldn't come to terms with them on the question of damage, since they might supply him with a brokendown wagon that he'd then have to pay for.

The others, already on their way, were adamant. So agreement was reached. As the wagon pulled round the corner Wang heard the carriers guffawing at those peasants and blockheads.

Agreement was quickly reached with the other eight; except that each of them felt obliged to pile on additional difficulties so the peasants wouldn't realize they were being swindled. One elderly man would have nothing to do with the business. He said he wanted to work on as usual, it was his living; and he'd made friends with the poor people up there, and was glad when he made it to them without arousing the suspicions of the police. Nonetheless Wang paid the agreed sums to the seven carriers when they met together

in the soup kitchen that evening. He explained with a certain enthusiasm that he found water-carrying an enjoyable occupation already; there were all sorts of ways to make money at it, for example if the guild dug its own wells or leased private wells. Those idle fellows found him quite amusing.

He slipped out of town before curfew, alone, leaving his round chest of human hair in the kitchen. There was a full moon. The wide plain stretched out from the walls; low elevations cast deep black shadows over the bare white levels. A pine plantation drew away behind; the moonlight touched only the top branches.

At about the time when the night watchmen were beating out the second watch, the peasants who kept guard over the Mongolian town noticed a strange flashing out there; it moved along the edge of the pine wood. Then a man emerged into the bright moonlight. Three of the sentries recognized the broad hat and the dangling shining sword: Wang Lun.

They called to each other, pointed to him, so clearly recognizable in the dazzling light; were alert and gleeful. He was there; he'd caught up with them. You could depend on him. The White Waterlily was there. They ran into a watchtower. It was Wang Lun, sitting alone out there opposite the Mongolian town. After a long while his sword glinted again; he retreated into the dark of the wood, quickly, as if it had swallowed him.

After wandering sleepless through the deathly silent wood a few times Wang was turning towards the plain, driven by his restlessness, when through the thin trunks bordering the road he saw a rider, followed by two others. He ran through the darkness ahead of them, recognized the costume of a high officer in the provincial army and two servants. They were riding slowly past the Mongolian town. Where the path turned for a while into the wood Wang stepped up to the gaunt officer, who wore a long beard and moustaches, and asked him for directions to a certain village.

The officer waved a hand to the southeast.

Wang walked calmly beside the bay. The officer reined in: did the stranger want something more?

Speaking at the ground Wang asked the officer to have his servants ride off a few paces for a moment, so he could ask something.

Quite coolly the officer waved the servants away and bent down towards Wang, to see his face better in the darkness.

What was the officer doing here. There was still a whole day and some hours left of the armistice between the Mongolian town and the army. Wearing the sapphire button he ought to know that.

The tall rider jumped from his horse, stared at the man under the enormous straw hat, in a thick straw coat that he held closed with one hand. What did he seek here; who had told him of an armistice. Was he a sentry for the besieged town.

Wang again bent his gaze to the ground, said “Yes” and opened his coat, revealing the sword. He was a friend of Ma No who led the besieged, a close friend.

The officer looked him in the face; he said very softly, “You’re no friend of Ma No. Ma’s friends don’t carry swords.”

“That was in the old days.”

“Since when has the unknown sentry been a close friend of Ma’s?”

“Since the destruction of the Isle of the Broken Melon. I joined them as they fled.”

“And Ma’s friends, Ma’s many friends now carry swords?”

“Ma doesn’t have many friends.”

The officer walked slowly back with Wang, handed his reins to a servant. They stood emerging from the darkness against two pine trunks, stood silently facing one another. Wang’s yellow straw coat shimmered in the light. A curved golden ornamental sabre swung at the belt of the very slow, calm horseman.

“If you are a sentry and a friend of Ma No, then tell me, I pray you, about him and how things are in the Mongolian town, what Ma does and says, who his confidants are.”

“The man with a leopard on his breast is no enemy of the Broken Melon?”

“My name is Hai, colonel of a cavalry regiment. A few months ago I wore no leopard on my breast. I went like you, was a brother

of those yonder. Because of my voice they called me Yellow Bell. Perhaps you have heard the name?"

"Not recently. Most of those who knew you are dead. Many have left us, like you."

Yellow Bell smiled sadly, turned his great head to the walls on which the sentries moved like black dots.

"It was not danger that sent me away, frightened. But I don't want to talk to you about it, since you are still a brother of the holy league even in such bad times. I should like to hear from you how it goes with Ma No, how the ghosts in the town are oriented."

"Keep talking. You won't sway me. We're calm, immovably calm."

Yellow Bell, pleased, laid a hand on Wang's breast: "You're calm, not fearful? Oh, that's splendid, oh, I'm so grateful to the stranger for telling me this. That's exactly why I came riding around here, to hear this from someone. Ma No is not oppressed with hate, doesn't rage against anyone."

"Since you were our brother, you should know that fate can't touch us. Your troops and whoever else come can't torment us."

"You speak as in earlier days. So Ma No doesn't rage! He doesn't resist!"

"You've become a soldier again. You put no trust in our precious rules."

"I trusted in the precious rules. And still trust. Don't look like that. I wouldn't have come riding here in the night if all were lost between Ma No and me. Ma No is the murderer of the Broken Melon, he knows that. I was around him in the days when he did it. He could have lived longer and better prepared with the brothers and sisters, if he hadn't let those idiot salt boilers lead him astray. He was proud, he was vain, he carried arrows, bows and swords in his spirit; he was no Truly Powerless, no brother of the wonderful Broken Melon. That's why I left him, I whose soul needed cleansing, and peace. But that's of no consequence here."

"The wild beast on your breastshield doesn't look peaceable."

"Nor does your sword. And yet here we stand, both looking out over this plain in the moonlight towards the Mongolian town—with

no feelings of enmity. I haven't changed. But Yellow Bell sings now in another tone."

"So it seems. And sings a different song."

"Yellow Bell witnessed the burning of the monastery. Sisters let themselves be roasted in the chapels; brothers had their heads and hands chopped off. You can't prepare yourself one day for the next, one year for the next; you'd need a long life for that, I think. But the seed has been sown in vain; the fine, deep, strong brothers and sisters have given up the ghost, I think; I can't get it out of my mind, how they were cut down. Cut down as I might be here, by you, since you carry your sword unsheathed while I must first let go the reins and free my blade. Their deaths gained nothing. But I now carry a sabre."

"Why? Against whom? Your sabre's a joke. You should have left your sabre lying in the box you keep it in at your family home. None of you will touch it as long as I exist. Don't smile; I mean it. Who are you carrying your sabre against?" Wang reached for the sabre.

"Not against Ma No, as you think. He'll soon be dead anyway. And Liang-li. Oh woe, woe."

"Who is the man with the leopard carrying a sabre against?"

Yellow Bell struggled with himself. He looked back at the wood. "Against the Manchus I now serve, and for those yonder that you are watching over, who in two or three days will be dumped into mass graves. But I'm glad you tell me such good things of those yonder. Why must it be, all of this."

"Fate must always be, Yellow Bell my brother."

"If you see Ma No, don't tell him about me. Tell no one."

"We'd better part. Your servants are coming. How are you going to get away from the Manchus?"

"We're gathering men, troops, many weapons. The Western Paradise is not for us, not yet, dear brother. Then I shall seek out Wang Lun, who is said to carry a sword like yours. Only that can help, nothing else. It's no use any more that you carry a sword. Don't be angry because I think differently from you. Go back to the town, or run away like me."

“Where are your troops? I shall remember your words.”

“Near Peking. Oh, what a glorious path our brothers and sisters are treading over yonder. My greatest desire is that they should find the Gates of Jasper and be received into the Heavenly Mother. The moon is so bright. May your path be easy. Easy.”

Yellow Bell stepped back from the trunk. They bowed to each other, touched one another on the shoulder.

Again Wang wandered, bereft of sleep, among the pines.

In the grey dawn Wang’s companions hauled the two-wheeled carts from the yards of their owners, harnessed horses, plodded to the well. After failing again to persuade the unwilling carrier to hand over his equipage for the day, two of Wang’s accomplices grabbed the man as he stepped out of his house in the darkness, stopped his mouth with tow, gagged him, tied him in a cowhide and carried him in a stolen cart to a secluded tumbledown house where they threw him into a corner.

The water carriers accompanied their pupils on the first trip of the morning to the Mongolian town; later they went back home, loitered in the wine shops. No one remarked on the old man’s absence, since the eccentric fellow wasn’t a regular carrier.

The day was warm. In the late afternoon Wang’s accomplices could be seen bustling about the jars that stood opennecked on their carts. They went around the empty jars knocking, leaned deep down into them in order to pour out the contents of their flasks unobserved.

So the dreadful train of the Truly Powerless progressed for the last time through the Mongolian town with waterladen carts, Wang at the head, returned with empty jars to the Lower Town through the gate that closed behind them. Hastily they rinsed and scrubbed out the jars, handed the carts back. One of them ran to the house where the old man lay, cut a hole in the cowhide so he could free himself.

There was lively activity on the walls among the armed men until deep into evening. Rumour said Wang Lun was marching to their

aid with a great army; they argued about the size of the relieving force, but it was at all events enormous, much larger than the provincial Tsungtu could raise from his own resources. At the base of the wall, inside the town, Ma No's armed attendants had knocked together a row of flatroofed huts from the frames of nearby houses that had made them uneasy. Great piles of rubble lay here, bricks; deep ditches had been excavated for collecting what dribs of water they could, for wetting clay. Rushes and reeds were piled high in the lanes. Great cartloads were dragged up, stuffed into gaps in the wall as a base for thick smears of clay. That night an extraordinary din rose from the toilers. A great hole in the wall, which for lack of time had been only superficially covered over with bricks, had to be repaired. It had been filled to the top with a loose mixture of rubble, sand, clay, stalks. The gate to the Lower Town was closed, barricaded with crossbeams. The townsfolk barricaded it from the other side, too, in order to contain within the Upper Town the fighting between provincial troops and the besieged.

Men ran back and forth in the half dark. Their zeal was unquenchable. Half naked, trouser belts askew they raced up to the hole, threw little bundles of reeds in, slid back past each other. One shouted: why did another carry so little? The other hoisted his bundle higher on his shoulder: wasn't that enough? On wooden sledges they dragged great heaps of stone that rumbled like waves over their heads and feet. They ran up and down untiring, seemingly inexhaustible, cacophonous, bleeding.

On the wall next to the gap a strong worker grew tired; he slapped a handful of clay onto a tall mason's back. They'd been gossipping and sniggering for an hour about a muleteer who that morning had brought into town not dried dates, but sacks full of sand. Only when he reached the market did he realize he'd been robbed on the way. When the mason turned round a roar of laughter burst at him from twenty mouths. They curled up, rolled on their sides to let laughter gather in their bellies, their legs wave in the air, diaphragms heave. Others jogged the ladders, shrieked, "Just look at him! Just look at him!" And cawed at his strangely swollen face, his

bulbous nose.

The tall fellow stared at the squat joiner, wiped his hand a couple of times across his nose, cursed his friend for the dratted onions he'd put in the bean broth; they made his eyelids and nose thick. And he hit the joiner, who now had the hiccups, hard in the belly.

The blow doubled him up; they set about each other with a will. The crowd urged them on at first; when, still fighting, they started tottering on the brink of the wall they were dragged noisily apart: "A judgement! To court! They must settle it. To court! To court!"

Tumbled down the ladders, as if there were a court for them there in the Mongolian town.

Their numbers grew on the way through the nearby lanes. A strident hubbub rolled along with them; the din of their tumbling voices knew no measure. Some pulled planks along behind them that people tripped over, but they kept pulling them along, only to let them fall without even noticing. Others stiffened backs and bowed shoulders beneath empty trugs they gripped with rockhard muscles, cursed at the others for setting such a pace and they couldn't keep up.

Two elderly artisans with naked brown-black torsos ran their hands over planks left lying at a corner. One plank had fallen across a large stone. They grinned at each other, searching along the rough wood from opposite sides until they stood close, their hands touched, and now, astride the plank, they sat and seesawed and continually bowed respectfully to each other and traded pathetic felicities. They bade one another bear up under the present conditions, then, as they raised their hands in solemn affirmation, slipped sideways and lay there; one across the other's legs apologized profoundly for his carelessness, felt his way along the other's trousers.

In the mob, which often dissolved completely in the little squares, delirium grew. Some were seized with boisterous merriment. A former salt panner lost his temper. He said he wouldn't go any farther. Liu was a wicked demon, there were two of him there, one Liu was over there by the houses, the other was beside him. They kept coming together, bouncing off each other, as if they were in the

water sinking. At these complaints the ones in front retraced their steps, took him into their midst, croaked hoarsely, flung arms uncertainly around his neck.

A young man pushed his way among them, yelled, “The villain! He’s up to the same tricks himself. Can’t you see? He’s standing here and now he’s sitting on the roof. What’s he cursing Liu for?” They squeezed one eye shut, hastily made Liu and the panner stand side by side. A couple stood straddlelegged squinting at them through circled fingers, squinted at the roof. Meanwhile most had drifted away, reeled along bawling happily behind the body of the mob as it made for the main marketplace.

But it never reached there. They had long forgotten what they were doing. Some scratched between the cobblestones. Some cawed, licked sleepy fingers, circled their arms. Heads lolled, dropped onto chests.

Men had already swarmed into the town from other parts of the wall. Their lungs were marvellously full. They shivered with a fever that flamed and sank fingerdeep beneath their skin. Blood surged into their heads. Their bodies dropped away from them. They set their feet so carefully because they were afraid of treading on glass with their straw sandals; they stepped ever so gingerly on tiptoe, ever so gingerly. They could go more safely if they took their sandals off. And so several balanced in single file through the alleys, footgear in their outstretched arms.

Farther into the town they climbed here and there over a man, they whispered, “Careful!” to one another with gesticulating arms, tried several times to step around the same body. Which lay there snoring, legs tucked up to chest, brow furrowed.

Men stood rooted in front of the houses. They leaned blue-lipped against doorposts. The breath was torn from them in violent gusts. They moaned, whistled and grunted like bellows. Brothers laid their bodies down cautiously on benches; every scene, house, figure, the dark of the sky span round in a spiral, the earth fell away beneath them like a great upturned pointed hat. Clumsily they pulled off their clothes, ready to jump; wheezed, waited for what would come.

Their ribs stuck out like thongs; they emitted rapid snorts.

Hundreds concealed themselves in the houses, in the corridors, under tables; a vice squeezed their bowels, spleen, belly and then loosed its grip. The vice worked on them with a rhythm that grew ever faster. They choked on yellow bile, intestines squirted and tried to escape. Faces lengthened. Green beasts ran past their faces to the right, then the beasts turned; the lot of them ran back towards the left.

Men staggered to the gate, to the walls. But they slipped between the rungs as they climbed the ladders, tried in vain to extricate themselves, overturned the ladders onto themselves. One managed to reach the top. They heard him go over the edge and down into the ditch where he was still twitching.

Black night. Water streamed down the flanks of many. A little wheel turned in front of them, ever more distant, it was the eye of a needle, a molehill, a cave. They rolled their eyes, were trapped in a spoke.

In stuffy rooms brothers shrank fearfully together at the cries and bumping outside. They huddled squatting over one another. Suddenly they started, glared about them drawing deep breaths as if they heard something, stood up swaying, again and again straightening bodies that kept sinking under them: “The soldiers are coming! All is lost! Wang and his ten thousand are beaten!” They turned on the silent corners of the room, threw stools, fled head down into the open air, grasped at one another in the darkness of the streets. Here and there two strangled each other. They thudded to the ground side by side with grunts of desperation. In their dreams they wielded clubs, pounded and throttled the thick slime that oozed between their fingers.

On the flat close-set roofs some were singing. They sang of the Great Traverse. Their hands swung imagined prayer bells. They preached across to one another. They called to the gleaming pinnacles of supreme bliss that they saw; they were so near. And when one of them heard the shrill voices from down the street he sighed, “Brothers!” with tears in his eyes, entranced. They stood up

and burst their skulls on the street, crushed a dying man as they fell.

As the night advanced and many lay phantasising in the alleys, in earthy hollows, under the eaves, something bright, striated, white, icy cold blew into necks, up to the backs of heads. When anyone turned he was seized by an invisible demon; with a cry something wrenched his twitching body straight, stretched it taut as if feet, hands, head were to be torn from it. And then it twisted limbs this way and that, rolled the body like a lump of soggy dough. When, dripping with sweat, they rested from the battle they screamed at the demon for his cowardice. Just let him come near again, stop hiding himself. They stared with glassy eyes about them, vomiting. And it came back. With one bound it seized them again. They sprawled and jerked together, as if shot from a catapult. Until their prolonged rigidity gripped their yearning like iron, clung to it in grim fury. And when it let go they still blinked strangely and forgot to breathe.

As noise spread from the walls that evening into the Mongolian town the night watchmen in the Lower Town hurriedly brought up great blocks of wood on oxcarts, piled them against the gate to the upper town. They weren't to let out any of the immured. Blows struck the gate from within.

The uproar inside increased momently; soon the whole Lower Town would be awake.

Now drumrolls sounded through the streets from three watchmen, woke the hundred former provincial troops who were scattered, still armed, around the town. They must come and stop the sectarians from breaking out into the Lower Town to escape what was clearly an assault. When the soldiers came running, climbed the watchtowers of the town, the countryside lay peaceful in the cloudy moonlight right up to the pine wood; utter darkness in the streets of the Mongolian town that seethed with a thousandfold roaring, screaming, howling. The enemy must be already in the town. But it was uncanny: no weapons clashed, no arrows; no house burned.

Frantic sounds from within. And now it was clear the wicked demons kept down for so long by the brothers and sisters had torn

themselves loose and fallen on them. Priests and bonzes were woken.

Ladders could be heard being placed against the gate; bodies tumbled with dull crumps.

All at once two grimacing, bloated faces appeared side by side over the gate, foaming at the mouth, whinnying like horses. The priests swung their tall bronze censers into the faces. From the shattered physiognomies thick blood dripped onto the watchmen, who shrank back in horror. The priests pointed burning brands at the two creatures, who were dragging themselves higher. Suddenly one reared up and crashed to the ground. The other puled unmelodically at the night sky, leaned his matted breast over the top of the gate; then the ladder was toppled from within; he sagged; his hands clung to the gate; soldiers loosed his fingers; he dropped heavily, lay mumbling on the earth for a long time.

No one in the Lower Town dared emerge onto the streets. Towards morning the noise moderated. Occasional shrill cries wafted down. In the later part of the night there rose from a house in the street that ran parallel to the gate a lone voice, a girl's voice; she was singing a dirty song. In between whiles she enticed, called men's names, rasped.

In the greying dawn the outer gate was opened. Traders, vegetable hawkers, countless wagons moved up the streets. The water carriers came. Wagons clogged the access to the Mongolian town. A way was cleared for the Taot'ai's green palanquin. The commander of the former provincial troops, now town garrison, a lanky fellow, ordered the gate opened. The beams were shifted, bars unfastened; soldiers pushed back the gates.

The moment the gate opened a loosened fragment of wall fell from the arch, covered the entrance in thick dust. Both gates had to be forcibly pushed in, the inner bolt broken, before the entrance was cleared.

Before nightfall the previous evening a heavy iron bar had been jammed between the stone walls as a barrier; on it a whole row of people leant bent double. When the bar was lifted the bodies

tumbled against the entering throng, crashed face down among them. Some were still alive and called out to the townsmen with faint voices. The soldiers pushed on. At one corner two girls stood, heads on each other's shoulders. They only fell when someone pulled the hand of one from her friend's waist. Here and there the dying slowly puffed out their cheeks. In more than twenty houses women were discovered in pools of blood; they had given birth in their convulsions; in convulsions they had ripped umbilicus and placenta from their bodies, quickly bled to death.

On the steps of one house in a corner of the marketplace squirmed a girl decked in narcissi; she shouted, "I am Liang-li. I want my father in Chengting." When they pulled her by the feet she struck about her and was dead.

They surged into the house. A little man was squatting on the k'ang in a corner of the bleak room. He pouted as the soldiers entered.

He stared at them, balancing his head, struggling to lift the lids of his hooded eyes. At the corner of his mouth sticky gobs of slime. His lips bright yellow; his face overlain by thick waxy skin; hollows in the temples. Snorts, snuffles: "She's coming at last. The Heavenly Mother herself is coming." Smiled proudly like one who commands.

The foremost soldier recognized the leader of the rebels, put a piece of red paper into his mouth to keep the demon from him. First he cut a gash in Ma No's mouth and chin with the tip of an arrow. Ma frowned, pushed himself upright against the wall, cawed like some animal, "Pah! Oh, pah!", staggered forward in rage and dread. The soldier grabbed him by the breast, thrust him choking from the k'ang on to the floorboards.

Book Three

Lord of the Yellow Earth

Ch’ien-lung, the great Emperor, who had received the empire of the world from Heaven and everchanging nature, emerged from his hunts and his musings on the northern steppes, made his way back to Mukden.

He had seen again the enormous landscapes of Tartary. Few days in their profound silence had been disturbed by tribute bearers. Tigers loped out of the woods. Week by week letters of fealty arrived from the Imperial princes and high nobility, enquiring after his health.

No great train accompanied the aging Emperor: two hundred men of his lifeguard, one pure Manchu company, a small number of favourites, friends, slaves; lastly the exquisite orchestra. He had hunted the high country east of Kalgan, on the edge of Mongolia. Bright cold air, broad open grassland, mountain glens, broken vistas. He made camp in the troughshaped valley near Hsüanhua-fu. The houses were dug into the loess, with rooms, vaults, passages. On the thinly peopled plains shaggy brown horses galloped. Teaburdened camels swayed by. Nomad families camped in big round tents of felt. Brown flatfaced Mongols with gaily coloured ribbons prostrated themselves.

At the frontier the Imperial train was joined by the commander of the frontier troops in his red fur cap and red wing collars. Then they crossed the outliers of the great Hsingan range, descended towards Mukden.

The Emperor’s gaze was remote, his expression fearsomely bleak.

Beneath tall willows clusters of peculiar houses appeared. A long, twisting mountain path led them to low hills where they saw broadleaved trees, women who wore arrows in their hair and fresh flowers. Cannons boomed from the eight towers on the walls of Mukden. They rode along the straight lines of the town, the Mongols behind on little ponies, until the roofs in the middle of the town came into view with their gleaming yellow tiles. For five days Ch'ien-lung remained in his palace.

In the autumnal park by a pond the Emperor sat alone on a stool, his lap filled with green lettuce leaves. In front of him a giant tortoise slept.

The carapace was black with yellow flutings. The broad central plate was edged in yellow with deep indentations. The clumsy forefeet extended sideways like flippers, toes like pegs driven into the feet. Hind legs drawn into the armour. The Emperor, dressed in black silk with a plain silk cap, rapped on the shell with a stout branch from which fircones dangled.

And then out of its lair the grey horny head emerged, that wonderfully passionless head on a wrinkled neck that sparkled like dried fish skin. Like a royal mummy: the long, withered, craning neck, the triangular skull turning in contemptuous unconcern. Jaws clamped, the severe work of plane and straightedge. Nostrils sunk with an auger. To the sides, lidless, immobile, clever wise eyes, windows of a gelid brain.

Slowly the shell lifts itself on one side, sinks back, pushes forward. It is the painful gait of a nimble but gouty and ancient man, who lifts his rump, doesn't bend his knee, swings his legs stiffly out sideways, slowly turns a corner. The foreflippers swim, right, left, scrape. The armour sinks back, the hind legs stretch and follow. A highpitched wheezing, a gentle hiss comes from the punched-out nostrils. Again the rump heaves, the front flippers slide forward. It is a climbing over level ground.

The Emperor sat on the stool with his fir branch. He tried to keep pace with the tortoise, to imitate it, and pondered. As it heaved forward it seemed to turn its eyes on him. He slid slowly after his

branch to the ground, crouched on his knees behind the creature as it moved away from him towards the pond. For some reason he bowed down behind it.

Very slowly, as Ch'ien-lung wished, the procession continued on its way. Wide sandy spaces alternated with fields of watermelon. The Liao-ho channelled black soupy eddies in which strips of green bobbed. For two days they waited for the arrival of an ancient Supervisor of Traffic from Niuchuang in order to sacrifice to the river God. Then they entrusted the ferry with the placid Emperor to the waters.

His entourage recognized this state of profound abstraction and lassitude. It had come upon him with increasing age. This man, once so energetic and commanding, now let them do everything, lead him, seat him. The great monarch's face as they rode silently past the li after li of shops in Hsinmi-ts'un was disconcerting in its uncanny absence of will, the rubbery softness and torpor of the eyes. His lips hung, he mumbled inarticulately. As the eight bearers marched slowly over the rippled sand his palanquin opened from within, he climbed out, the front bearers turning in astonishment, and ambled along beside an old halberdier who failed to recognise him. When the horrified Protocol Officers leapt out of their chairs and fell to the ground before him, led him by the hand to his palanquin, he stumbled along with them, wearily raised his swollen eyelids, looked at them in puzzlement. His eyes wept. Before he climbed back into the palanquin they wiped spittle from his grey beard. They walked along beside the palanquin. Across the Taling-ho they came to Imperial grazing grounds. From the tall watchtowers in the centre of Chinchou-fu cannons again boomed greetings.

The officials stood beside the closed palanquin. They lay in the dust before his sleeping body. His state of indifference improved when they approached the Great Wall. A gentle excitement took hold of the Emperor. He ate well, refused to lie in the palanquin, plucked flowers by the wayside. Their progress had to be speeded. When they asked after his health he waved them away with his flywhisk, not speaking. Half fuddled, he climbed on one occasion

during these days onto a block of granite beside the road, and fell. But he was visibly more responsive, observed the work in the fields, summoned his travelling librarian to his side, of whom, however, he asked nothing. They remarked happily on the icy looks he again cast.

A warm breeze blew. He had drawn aside the curtains of his yellow palanquin. In the late afternoon the Director of the Ministry of Rites, Sung, and Hu Chao, Superintendent of the Imperial Eunuchs, walked beside the Imperial chair. Sung a bent man, who wore hornrimmed spectacles on his little wrinkled face and screwing up his eyes sought in vain to discern the beauties of the landscape that Hu described to him so enthusiastically. Hu, a stout gentleman with pendulous cheeks, in the ardour of his descriptions often took the worthy Sung's hand and squeezed it, so that the eager Minister could at least feel something of the general enchantment.

They chatted of the tenderness with which a young and rising poet had treated the melancholy of white poplars, and how well he had brought off a few interesting verses on the well-worn theme of a boatride on a moonlit lake. Hu, though not educated like Academician Sung, gushed praises of the poem's strict form, of the poet's wonderful calligraphy with its novel flourishes. They inhaled the strong dungy odour of the fields.

Then a fine perfume wafted at their side. A silken rustling. Between them walked a well-built man of medium height who, when they made to fall at his feet, grasped their queues and walked on with them, arms around their shoulders. The light hard voice of Ch'ien-lung inserted itself between Sung's measured falsetto and the enthusiastic drone of fat Hu.

The Emperor smiled when they exchanged embarrassed glances at his seizing on something they had just said: "Don't talk in the streets, as we say within the Four Seas. The paving stones have ears. Excellency Hu remarked on the marvellous calligraphy in which this young man wrote his poem. Some months ago in Peking I had the pleasure of speaking to a missionary of the Jesus religion. The redhaired people are barbarians, as we all know. They told me in

their importunate way of many things; of their poets too. Those fellows write as they please. Calligraphy is of no consequence to the poetry. Even an illiterate peasant can be a poet."

"How ridiculous, Majesty," said old man Sung. "The western longnoses are—this ant was about to say, ruffians. How absurd, indeed, to speak to us of their so-called poets."

"Your Grace will have read much of my work."

"All of it, Majesty."

"All, then. I don't like flattery. Excellency Hu has also read much of my work?"

Hu was agitated. He was easily carried away, was a staunch admirer and protector of artists, but his learning left much to be desired.

"This donkey, Majesty, has indeed read much from the Imperial brush—"

"—but has not understood it. No blame for that, Hu. And no opinion is required. What I want to say is something else. A peasant woman, like that one there, scatters white grain on the ground. A boy pulls a cart behind her with manure. Larks sing, autumn. There's no reason why this scene should be—poetised; it is unsurpassably present. Nevertheless I could be tempted to poetise it, but then I enter into a commitment with—the scene."

"Well put, Majesty!"

"Not yet, Your Grace. I mean a commitment to preserve it with respect, to leave the spirit of this moment undisturbed, to sacrifice to it as a creature of the earth. Thus, sitting in my study, do I think of poetry. I, an insignificant mortal, sit in my study and five days earlier there lived the spirit of a reverential moment: two different things. I sacrifice to the spirit of Heaven as befits a rich man and strive to please the spirit of that venerable moment. A peasant, a beggar can't do that; there are other spirits for them. The finest, softest paper must be used; inks of deepest red and black have been made ready for the brush. And now I write the characters. Their purpose is not to inform, although of course they also serve to inform; round pictures rife with connotations, resonating to the

works of the sages, beautiful in themselves, beautiful in juxtaposition. These pictures are themselves little souls, and the paper partakes of them."

"Still better put, Majesty!" wheezed Sung. "Cretin that I am, I have heard the same from our astronomer, the Portuguese, that in the West people write as they speak. Which of course is as convenient as it is simple. But if your most exalted Majesty would favour me with a boon, I should like to make a request."

"Your Grace?"

"That I might be permitted to sit in my sedan chair, or even better in a tent, out here in the country, and listen to Your Majesty for as long as is granted me. Your Majesty's slave is growing weak in his ancient legs."

At a nod from Ch'ien-lung the Minister gave brief commands to two lancers up ahead; the vast train halted under the open sky. While the Emperor's little yellow travelling tent was being erected in a meadow and lancers cleared the field of peasants, he himself stood before potbellied Hu and the Minister, whose scholar's face bore signs of weariness; let his hands fall, and sighed.

But the two high officials who looked at each other in dismay were wrong: Ch'ien-lung was thinking of Peking and his sigh was of impatience.

The Emperor desired two more days on the road.

The deferment of their homecoming aroused pleasure in all the train. The unwonted sight of the Son of Heaven moving with a spring in his step enlivened everyone. For hours the Emperor debated, now with Sung, whose learning he treasured immensely, now with the tough, stocky general A-kuei, promoted at his own hand from common soldier to officer. A-kuei's bellicose nature refreshed him; the drolleries of this uncultivated man were a source of amusement for the entire Imperial company.

They proceeded along the Chao-ho, crossed the grey stone bridge over the Pai-ho. Once through the village of Niulan-shan the train bore westward from the main road along avenues laid out especially for it towards the mountains northwest of the Residence, where the

Emperor kept pleasure grounds.

In the northern Tartar quarter of Peking the streets along which the train must pass were cleansed and smoothed. Side streets were sealed off with painted boards; it was forbidden on pain of death to leave house or barracks during the morning. Gongs clashed and drums beat the whole day. Since the astrologers in the Imperial train had been unable to calculate the hour of entrance into the Vermilion City in time, the entrance was delayed past morning even though the travellers had lain up a whole day in the mountains to the northwest, and the country people had heard the wonderful music of the court orchestra playing almost continuously across the shining lake of K'unming-hu.

The Emperor spent the last day before his return on the summit of Wanshou-shan, in the woods of whiterimmed spruce. Before dark he went down to the eastern shore of the lake, strolled over the seventeen-arched bridge to the island with its temple that only he might visit. A bronze cow stood mute at the entrance. In the temple the Emperor spoke to his ancestors.

The waterclock showed the double hour of the dragon as the Imperial train next morning passed through the village of Haitian. They came by the stoneflagged road to the northern gate of the Manchu city of Peking, the Tesheng-men. The double hour of the snake commenced as the Son of Heaven glimpsed the purple walls.

Chia-ch'ing was a son of Ch'ien-lung, son of the Emperor's legitimate consort. Chia-ch'ing alone was permitted to accompany Ch'ien-lung as he strolled through the gardens of the Vermilion City. The Emperor bubbled over with animation, came to a halt beneath the giant cypresses, spoke urgently to his stolid son, who towered above him by a head. The prince, not yet forty, had a spongy, wrinkled face; smiles found no dwelling in these broad, bloated masses of flesh. When this lanky man whose head, round as a ball, was fixed solidly between his shoulders felt amused, a flickering and fluttering set up around the little plump mouth; the lines that rippled outwards from it were repulsed by the immobile cheeks, and so the smile fidgetted about his lips as if stranded. The puffy eyelids

hung. He could open the left eye only a little. His skin had an unhealthy pallor. His Highness was unfathomable, no one came really close to him; indeed, the physical proximity of most of those in his retinue made him acutely nervous. The prince listened irresolute and passive to his father. He clung to his father as to some blessed object that one does not sniff at, accepts with gratitude. They spoke of the unrest among the Mohammedans. Chia-ch'ing turned, and they strolled towards the menagerie of which they were both so fond. An iridescent green peacock strutted along the marble balustrade of a white bridge. The gentlest of breezes ruffled the reflection of the bridge in the dark water. It lifted the hem of the yellow Imperial gown slightly and swung the golden tassels at Chia-ch'ing's girdle.

That night the Forbidden City was overtaken by cold and showers of rain. Two days of rest the Yellow Lord granted himself. He sat at games of morra in the pillared hall of the Imperial quarters. His writing desk, low, of massive gold, was placed close behind him. Its top rested on the back of an elephant, whose legs formed the legs of the desk. Ch'ien-lung used to read off his poems from the long face of the God of Literature, who stood before a delicately fashioned pagoda in the middle of the desk, and from the folds of his gown. A-kuei the jester, honest man of action, squatted facing the Emperor on the ebony floor. A thickset, shortlegged man with a square face and erect back. A-kuei was always of the same temper. You could stick him in a corner and fetch him out again: he would act as if nothing had happened. His rough manners, coarse laughter, crude turns of phrase were considered sanctioned, were cultivated in the Vermilion Court. He himself seemed unaware of them, evinced unhappiness at every breach of etiquette; his attempts at caution made him even more comical. He was a splendid morra player, this peasant, better than Ch'ien-lung. Some whispered that A-kuei was not only grasping and avaricious, but frankly undependable; he was a fomenter of intrigues, a scandalmonger who used his boorishness to powerful advantage. Naturally such talk found willing ears among the most eminent courtiers: A-kuei's services in the difficult

campaign against the Miao-tzu discomfited other men. While the grey capricious ruler sat with A-kuei at the game board, their elegant and cultivated lordships laughed as they amused themselves out on the fishing terrace flying kites; they professed to think that the Emperor tolerated his jester's prattle; in reality he listened to them. But the Emperor belonged to the men on the fishing terrace and to A-kuei and to others: in his life he needed much and ignored everyone.

On the morning of the second day Chao Hui rode through the Meridian Gate and made the ninefold genuflection before Ch'ien-lung in the Hall of Exalted Harmony. The Yellow Lord mounted his horse; it took him out through the Western Flower Gate and at a regular pace around the three lakes, Chao Hui beside him, on to birdloud Coal Hill. The lean, supple mandarin was famous not only for his incomparable services in the campaign against the Dzungars on the Empire's northwest frontier; no one forgot the deeds of this elegant man on the green banks of the Ili Chao Hui, holder of the title Guard of a Gate of Peking, whom the Emperor, after the crushing of the Dzungars, had come to meet bearing a cup of tea at the door of the Summer Palace, was famous also for his legitimate wife. The Emperor frequently read her poems, her impetuous yet restrained prose. Hai-t'ang was her name, the daughter of a former Governor of Anhui. When she married she received as dowry from the Emperor broad fertile estates in the south, on the lower reaches of the Yangtse. The infamous Ili army, the incendiary murderers of Ili, were under Chao's command. No one dared demobilize these brutes; they were stationed in Chihli as a reserve guard.

For two days they found delight in fighting birds, huamei and wushicha, rowed on the artificial lotus pond. Only Chia-ch'ing, the heir apparent, walked along the bank. He never boarded a boat, could not stand the rowers close to him. Invited, he always made the same movement: a defensive spreading of both hands in front of his chest. The mere invitation unsettled him, and once home his face and neck had to be rubbed with silken cloths.

Then the heavy, holy shrouds of the past fell over the Yellow Lord.

He steeped himself in the terrible loftiness, the idolatrous glow of his rank; he found himself in the place prepared for him. By not so much as a finger did he disturb the stem rites. Without the sacred ritual the world collapsed, the earth lay alone, men would hurl themselves at one another, spirits of the air rage, heaven curl up, disorder break loose. Relations with Heaven and the Netherworld must be firmly maintained. The ancient past and its glorious flower, Confucius, knew that in the world of appearances the blood of Heaven must flow through every movement; nothing was without meaning. And so Ch'ien-lung spared himself none of the exhausting ceremonial. He did not feel above all this; he considered himself lucky to be the upholder of these terrible things beyond the control of men.

When he fasted on the day before the sacrifice to Heaven and the sharp eyes flashed in the immobile face, his servants knew as well as the priests, the favourites of his retinue, that this man did nothing superficially. Anything mechanical in their actions was noted by one glance of his eye. Ch'ien-lung, as Son of Heaven, prayed in earnest, thrillingly sincere.

One dark autumn morning the Yellow Lord was carried into the Temple of the Ancestors. As he climbed the last step, a stone clattered a hand's breadth from him onto the paving and smashed. Discomposed by the evil portent the Emperor went in to the tablets, recited the prayers. He was seen pacing up and down in his palace, greatly agitated. The ancestors weighed on Ch'ienl ung, they lashed him. This hotblooded restless man, the older he grew, could not live up to his ancestors. He trembled to think that he was born into the fearful responsibility of a descendant.

This was the day when the report on the Mongolian town and the destruction of Ma No had to be laid before him. Concealment or delay were impossible now that the viceregal memorial had been received. The astronomer, hastily summoned, reported one double hour later that the fallen stone was a fragment of meteorite; the grey ruler received the information impassively. Since the Imperial seal of this day's date had to be affixed to the memorial the deputy

president of the Council of State approached Chia-ch'ing, who undertook the commission disgusted with the man's cowardice. The Tsungtu's report was a bald one: it began with a reference to the military action launched against the remnants of the sect, described the investment of Yangchou, the final positions of the troops under their generals, whose names were supplied, then the discovery when the army marched in of the entire besieged population, dead. Wang Lun was designated the murderer, rumours of a massacre by demons not suppressed.

Chia-ch'ing, horror running down his spine, weighed the scroll in his hand. Were he Emperor, the Viceroy of Chihli and all the generals involved would be executed before the day was out, together with the bearer of the missive and the couriers. He gave instructions for three Under-directors of the Encyclopedia to lecture that afternoon to the Yellow Lord, among them the brilliant Hui, who always knew how to captivate the Emperor. First the deputy president of the Council of State bore onto the fishing terrace curiosities from the campaign against Burma; Ch'ien-lung showed lively interest. Hui was sent forward. Then Chia-ch'ing. The Emperor was still deeply pondering Hui's quotations when he impressed his crimson seal onto the scroll. Boys in the tripleroofed Pavilion of Instruments sang antiphons with two choirs in a boat.

The Emperor, suddenly distracted again, pushed back a vase of blue porcelain: he wanted to ask Hui something more. Then: not Hui, he already understood the allusion; rather, what was it they had just reported about the—. Chia-ch'ing in alarm mentioned details of the Burmese. The Emperor, puzzled, asked where he had learned these details. Chia-ch'ing: hadn't they just heard a talk on the subject. And why was he so interested in the Burmese all of a sudden that he could recall so many details; in any case, it wasn't that; was it not Hui in fact—. After lengthy toing and froing of questions and glances the Emperor focussed on Chia-ch'ing: surely he was only interested in politics and what had he brought up himself just now, this little local occurrence in Chihli. He wanted to show him the sort of thing an Emperor was pestered with, what trifles were put up to

him. The scroll, then. The heir apparent knelt beside the Emperor, who read out the report line by line with a little red pointer. A third of the way through he laid the pointer aside, read in silence, then told Chia-ch'ing to kneel somewhat farther away. And for a quarter of an hour the ten men around the Yellow Lord kept silent as he read; he seemed not to hear the singing, for he did not order it stopped. Without a glance at any of his retinue the Emperor rose quickly, scroll in hand, climbed into his palanquin.

What else happened on the evening of this day in the Forbidden City is not known in detail. The Emperor spent the evening alone in his room with A-kuei, after a number of his favourites had found it necessary for some reason, apparently because of a sudden eruption of excitement on the part of the Emperor, to leave the room. Weeping and distraught, Ch'ien-lung is supposed to have smashed a wonderful rare vessel that stood on a stand of porphyry: an ancient plateshaped vessel of bronze, a lotus leaf sliding from the back of a slowworm. Late in the evening two astrologers were first summoned to the darkened palace quarters, then sent away again. Just as the captains of the guard were shifting uneasily outside the Emperor's window because it had stayed quiet for too long inside, Ch'ien-lung's gong was struck. He was sitting in an awkward posture among the shards of the vessel. A-kuei transmitted with menacing severity the order to summon an extraordinary council in the morning, and at the same time to make preparations for a journey to the Summer Palace. His Majesty desired his sleeping quarters. Torches appeared.

The next afternoon a conference took place, during which the Court of Censors was commissioned to investigate the Ma No affair. The following morning, with a minimal retinue, the Yellow Lord slipped hurriedly out of the Forbidden City. On boats they crossed the artificial lakes beside the Imperial palaces, through the north wall of· the city up the stream that drained from K'unming Lake. No flutes played on the yellow-pennanted boats. Gusty autumn shook the stonepines in the lush bankside gardens, tinkled the little bells

hanging in thousands from the upswung roofs of elegant summer houses, secluded pavilions; all went unremarked from the boats. Oars creaked in the tholes, struck the water in rhythm; they glided under bridges of icy white marble from Kaoliang-ch'iao to the ornate humpback bridge, sped into K'unming-hu. The glorious surroundings seemed to calm the Emperor. The censors came out from Peking.

More enlightening than debates as to whether in the history of the empire demons had ever caused the deaths of so many was the report of the commanding generals: that a notorious bandit by the name of Wang Lun, guilty, as had subsequently been discovered, of several murders, had offered to make the sectarians vanish by some means within three days. This, together with some unusual goings-on in the populous Lower Town of Yangchou before it was taken, gave cause for suspicion that Wang Lun, with the aid of persons unknown, had poisoned the wells. A hunt for this man, notorious throughout Shantung and Chihli, held in quite extraordinary regard by the common people as a sorcerer, was now in progress.

Ch'ien-lung froze and trembled with horror. He said to Chao Hui it was impossible to comprehend such an atrocity; truly, no man could fathom such deeds. With a certain lack of ardour, a curious pensiveness, he decreed the speediest possible apprehension of the murderer, who was to be brought at once to Peking. No interrogation: he himself would conduct the only interrogation of Wang Lun. No one was permitted to mention the name of Chia-ch'ing.

For the ministers this decision concluded the affair. But it gnawed at the Emperor. Only just himself again, he was more than ever disposed to pay heed to external things, to start at the jangling of unfamiliar events. Heartsore, unnerved, he would not let it be. He wanted to sniff out connections, signs, voices.

No long sojourn in Yuanming-yuan: after only a month the Imperial court set off for Kolotu'r, a village southwest of Peking where the monastery of Chieht'ai-ssu lay, its extensive buildings sprawling over sprucewooded hills. This was Ch'ien-lung's favourite resort; one's unobstructed eye could sate itself on the myriad roofs of

the city, the delicate pavilions gleaming on Coal Hill, the white shimmer of Lukou-ch'iao bridge; just below one's feet the green waters of the Hun-ho.

While the aged ruler pondered and pondered on the terrace and avoided Peking like an exile, insolent pleasures sprouted in the Vermilion City. Plump Chia-ch'ing behaved like a usurper. He had the deputy president of the Council of State thoroughly flogged, without Imperial sanction, for some breach of etiquette. He vowed revenge on the Yellow Lord for daring to treat him so. Then all at once, fearful of the consequences, he resolutely shrugged off the distressing affair. He soothed himself, spoke calming words. At Court he staged amusements, ribaldry. Masques were organized which evolved into parodies of exalted figures, of the most exalted. When word came that the Yellow Lord was returning he slipped away with his jugglers and musicians to the Western Hills where he had a house on Jade Spring Hill, protected by a tall pagoda dating from the time of the great Manchu emperor, K'ang-hsi.

While on the frontiers of the empire an unusual peace reigned, Ch'ien-lung succumbed more and more to the insidious effects of that dreadful event. He understood why the Court astrologers were so thoughtful, his censors so distracted; they were mulling over the import of various things they would not speak of, in particular this doom, this calamity of unprecedented horror; considering which authorities should answer for it. The Emperor would not flinch from the lance thrust; he was the pivot of the empire. Through him Heaven spoke, only to him.

Erupting from unapproachable silence he drove three censors yet again, still in winter, out to the Mongolian town of Yangchou to investigate the affair. They returned shaking their heads: one of the many proscribed sects that were confusing the minds of the common people and impoverishing the land was implicated in it.

Ch'ien-lung scorned this diversionary explanation. Events of such horror could not be explained rationally.

One day in the tenth month of the year Imperial couriers sped to Peking, into this walled expanse containing, besides meadows and fallow land, a city that rang hour after hour to a cacophonous roar. To Ch'ien-lung were summoned A-kuei, loyal Chao Hui, Sung the historian and certain others.

In the Hall of Spiritual Growth, the Yanghsin-tien, they were received by the Emperor in a high small room used only for secret conferences. Absolute silence reigned after the Emperor appeared and the guests prostrated themselves; then at a word from the Emperor they took their places. An enormous cloth of yellow silk hung across the ceiling; a mighty dragon embroidered in gold, red and blue swooped across the symmetrical silken folds that came together in the middle of the ceiling. The windows were curtained despite the daylight; heavy bronze oil lamps hung on chains that pierced the silken ceiling, cast a reddish light over the carpeted steps, the ruler in his yellow gown and the resplendent motionless guests. Silently young eunuchs busied themselves above and below, served tea in a golden service. Ch'ien-lung raised a cup to his guests, held the little porcelain cup for a long time and read the verse inscribed on it, that he himself had composed:

> Over a low fire set a tripod, whose bloom and grain betoken long use. Fill it with pure snow water. Boil the water for as long as would be needed to turn fish white or crabs red. Pour it onto tender leaves of choice tea in a cup of Yüeh-ware. Let it steep until the steam has risen in a cloud and on the surface there remains but a thin swirling mist. Drink this precious liquor at your pleasure, and it will dissipate the five causes of ill-humour. This moment of peace I can only taste and enjoy, not describe.

The Yellow Lord's hard low voice continued. These intrigues in the land, in particular the northern provinces, called for sharper vigilance. The so-called Wu-wei sect had been formed by a man called Wang Lun; factionalism among its adherents had led to the defection of one group, which gave itself the scurrilous name of the Broken Melon and instigated open rebellion. The Wu-wei sect itself seemed to have vanished from the earth, likewise Wang Lun. These people must be sniffed out from their hiding places in the great cities

and among country folk.

Sung reported that instructions had been issued to Ch'en Yuan-li, Tsungtu of Chihli and to Hsu Chi, governor of Shantung. Surveillance operations in the towns had been reinforced; the investigation of sudden deaths and unexplained assaults had improved immeasurably; population movements in the two affected provinces were under the strictest control both in towns and in the countryside, supervision and the compiling of name lists entrusted to absolutely dependable officials.

The Emperor spoke: "I have forbidden Excellency Chao Hui to unleash his elite troops until I give express orders. I may yet turn these troops on the rebels. For now I order you, Excellency Chao, to concentrate your forces in a state of readiness north of Peking. Have the local authorities make it known by wall poster and crier that civil jurisdiction will be suspended; the victorious elite of Excellency Chao are authorised, with the cooperation of the Tsungtu, to proceed directly against treasonable localities."

Liu E, former Viceroy of Chihli, was present: a great bent figure with a long beard. Shocked like the others, he counselled against harsh threats that might lead to results not bargained for; the Wu-wei sect weren't for certain of an anti-dynastic tendency; was there proof in fact of their presence at the scene. Threats might simply rally whatever remnants of the sect, bring discontented elements together.

Chao Hui, recognizing tension in the Imperial face, riposted. He referred to the arrest a month ago of forty men and women in the district of Taming, confessed adherents of Wang Lun who had been agitating among provincial troops against the war and the warlike alien Pure Dynasty.

Ch'ien-lung fixed his icy gaze on the Viceroy. "What do they have against the Pure Dynasty? My ancestors didn't volunteer to come down into this Land of the Flowering Centre. If we of the Ta Ch'ing hadn't come, what would the land be now?"

After a pause during which he stared fiercely before him Ch'ien-lung continued: "The gentlemen whom I had the honour of greeting

are no astrologers. My astrologers are conscientious scholars; they take ample time to complete a calculation. Just now you gentlemen were very rash with your conjectures; you came out with a conjecture before I'd even posed the question. The three censors, too, who set out this winter to investigate the calamity in the Mongolian town of Yangchou brought back honeyed conjectures to me. If a house, a theatre, a government building bums down somewhere, then—apart from the town god—the Taot'ai all the way down to the fireman and policeman are deemed responsible. The ancient books advise us that this practice should not apply in exceptional cases; you can proceed from here, my learned counsellors. After much conjecture, excessively furtive, prevaricatory, sugarcoated conjecture by my astrologers and censors, I am supposed to put my hand to my forehead and go to the Temple of Heaven, exculpate myself, perform sacrifices of expiation, ask Heaven's will."

"Laws against heresy are needed," began A-kuei bluntly. "Your Majesty wouldn't be the first to make or apply them. The behaviour of these Wu-wei people and their foul sect comes within the scope of such laws."

"Consequently," concluded Chao Hui, "this is a case for legitimate measures with a practical termination."

"The eighteen provinces, Tibet, Ili, the islands-these have no meaning any more. What seems a trivial incident, the deed of this Wang Lun, comes to my ears. Why did I hear nothing of it? And yet I was placed upon the Dragon Throne to see, discern, guide, answer to Heaven. Where can I find the strength? And how can a single frail body withstand the blows that must be laid on it for so much negligence, carelessness? It's no excuse to say that no one stands by me. You don't accuse me. You're not much help to me. Wang Lun is at large in the land. The situation has a voice which I hear clearly calling, warning. And you, as ever, are sycophants."

Chao Hui asked that he might be allowed to speak. He stepped back towards Sung, whose erudite forehead was already pressed to the carpet. "The matters Your Majesty has touched on are too subtle for the unaided advice of men schooled in politics and war. I humbly

propose that a commission be named, comprising the five most senior astrologers and three politically adept servants of Your Majesty. Let the commission be empowered to make a thorough and wideranging investigation of this business and lay a report before Your Majesty and the Court of Censors."

Chao Hui, less hardbitten than he looked, begged in an unsteady voice, "Whatever Your Majesty decides, pray doo not rescind your first order: to keep the Northern Residence under military protection."

Slowly Ch'ien-lung's gaze searched each face in turn. Then he nodded, stretched forward his ffinely shaped head as if he wanted to speak with emphasis. His voice was softer than before: "Proceed with the formation of a joint commission. The Director of Highways in the western provinces reports that winter shows signs of being short and mild this year; already the valley sections of the roads from Tibet are open. I place my hopes on one other adviser, an extraordinary one. I thirst after the Ocean of Wisdom, the Tashi-lama Lobsang Paldan Ishe. This is what I wanted to say to you. Mull it over, my noble Sung, Excellencies A-kuei, Chao Hui, with my astrologers. I have bestowed rank on you, but you owe me far, far more than that."

And it had indeed been done, even before the conference in the Hall of Spiritual Growth: Ch'ien-lung had sent a letter to this man, this Ocean of Wisdom. Half ashamed of his action the Emperor had kept it to himself. Three times the Yellow Lord had summoned him in earlier years. The Tashi-lama, Lobsang Paldan Ishe, Tibetan pope of the lamaic church, representative of the infant Dalai Lama, had declined: the journey would be too hard for one of his advancing years. In fact the wise old man knew he'd be expected to appear before the eastern ruler as tributary and vassal. Now the Emperor was seized by a passionate desire to see the great man from the west. The letter, couched in the most solemn terms, strove to conceal any hint of helplessness, referred first to a political matter: the

friendship shown by the Tashi-lama to the foreigner George Bogle, emissary of the English in India, during his visit to Tashilunpo. Ch'ien-lung viewed this friendship with favour, for it demonstrated how far the influence of lamaic wisdom had spread, that even barbarian peoples sought through the intercession of the great lama to submit themselves to the protection of the Central Floreate Kingdom. He yearned to speak in person to the man who revealed himself hourly to be the incarnation of the Buddha Amithaba. "I am now so old, and the only indulgence that would give me pleasure before I depart this life is to see you and to pray in company with the holy Tashi-lama."

The Tashi-lama Lobsang Paldan Ishe was not much younger than the Emperor. He hesitated a long time over his reply to Ch'ien-lung's invitation. This man whose eyes flashed dark as the turquoise lake of Tsomawang, in whose waters great Mount Kailas is reflected and the God Shiva lives, spent two whole anxious days before accepting from the hand of the Chinese Resident the autographed letter from the Overlord of the eastern world. He fasted these two days, kept to his cell in the labrang, the monastery opposite the white roofed town of Shigatse in the valley of the Nyandju.

On the morning of the third day the walls surrounding the monastery town were rimed with frost. The gold tiling that roofed the sumptuous mausoleums of earlier lamas was dulled; the fringes of the white woollen scarf which the great lama sitting at the window wore about his neck sported over the black massive sill, fumbled flapping in the biting wind over the weathered stones beyond.

Only then did the Emperor's letter transform itself in the eyes of the brooding man, lose its menace.

Paldan Ishe had become a man of flesh. Something mortal, petty had blown from some corner through the vault of his soul. During his two days of hesitation the eastern Emperor Ch'ien-lung had communicated something to him.

Ishe had feared for his flesh.

Warmth, sympathy returned to the eyes of this incomparable man.

Slightly ashamed he stepped back from the window.

Let Ch'ien-lung's envoy enter; it would give him profound joy to read a letter from the Lord of the East. His assent followed much later, after all around had urged him for almost a whole month to decline. They could no longer disturb the holy man's calm. In the faces of his pupils, abbots, doctors, learned men he saw the same fear that for two days had flayed his own body.

Lobsang Paldan Ishe came from the southern part of Tibet. His father had been the most effective civil administrator of the land of snows, the indispensable support of the learned and dreamy Hutuktu to whom the province had been entrusted. When the Tashi-lama, his predecessor, died Paldan Ishe was three years old.

Three clever, pretty boys stood in front of the old Dalai Lama under the radiant golden dome of his labrang in Lhasa. Together with the most senior of his abbots he prayed devoutly before hundred-armed Buddha, whose incarnation he was. When he turned smiling to the children, his glance met first the dark brown eyes of little Ishe, who held the glance with enigmatic seriousness. Thus was the migrating soul of the Tashi-lama recognized in the boy.

He was torn from his father, kept isolated through the years that followed; knew no games, no walks through busy streets, saw no other boys, no girls. The world came to him only in the trains of pilgrims gathering in the courtyards of Lhasa to catch a glimpse for a moment of the Dalai Lama as he hastened with amiable nods to his chapel or an ordination ceremony. It was always the same: prayers, prostrations, rapturous greetings.

Ishe grew into this monotonous life, devoid of all excitement and diversion. He had to incline his head like the Dalai Lama. Old men, beggars, high priests bent their backs to him. A terrible unearthly seriousness attached itself to his person; Ishe knew and saw nothing else.

He did not shrink from himself. He became familiar with the vast connectedness of worlds and their obdurate interweavings. The epochs of three Buddhas had been; the epoch of Sakyamuni was now; the Maitreya would come. A world-liberating spirit, the Buddha

Amithaba, grew in him. He was only cautiously allowed to watch the bustle of pilgrims, must eschew all selfwilled acts.

Ishe matured. His wisdom was all encompassing. He lived already like the Dalai Lama in a state of profound happiness, pure knowledge, grave sympathy. He knew his place in the system of the world. Then he was brought to Tashilunpo to teach the great theories.

Decades slid by. With age there grew in the Reverend of Pure Devotion a sense of the magnitude of his task. The suffering he observed both near and far shocked him mightily. This was truly the world that must be succeeded by the world of the Maitreya. The Buddhas of this world and their emanations were no match for the overpowering, overwhelming burden of suffering and ruination.

Months before his departure a stream of pious beggars, pilgrim men and women from every province and from Mongolia made its way towards Tashilunpo. Many who reached the goldroofed monastery town began to trace out in their own fashion the route the holy man would take: they threw themselves full length on the ground, placed a stone at their forehead, stood by the stone, threw themselves down again and so measured the road with their bodies.

From Lhasa caravans wended southwest to Lunpo; they swung onto the route the lama would take. Their passage could be traced. Countless prayer flags hung on strings from tree to tree, from post to post; they erected tumuli of stones with the six blissful syllables *om mane padme hum*. On passes and mountains they laid the shoulderbones of sheep. They pulled out their own teeth and stuffed them as sacrifices in cracks in the cliffs, cut off locks of hair, tied them with string and hung them to flutter beside bright rags.

Then the train filled the narrow streets as it left the monastery buildings with their crimson breastwork, the purple of their window bays, steep walls, the up and down of rockcut steps, the roofs and cells. The goldgleaming labrang looked from blackrimmed windows onto the departing caravan, like a widow whose tears were frozen. Bright flags flapped, horns blared. Lobsang Paldan Ishe, the Ocean of Wisdom and Virtue, had set off for Peking.

It was winter now. The enormous levy that accompanied the lama pope trudged ponderously forth. Treeless steppe stretched away endlessly. In the hard ground stood thorn bushes, wretched pines and spruce. Cold air blew. In a finely carved and painted palanquin with yellow curtains four monks bore the holy man, squatting motionless on tucked-in feet on a red cushion, shaven head bare. His ears were large, long. He wore a black silk gown embroidered in blue, with white fur sleeves. Pages of the Kandjur before him.

In the broil around him novices, consecrated priests, scholars, magicians, medicine men, all handpicked. The train grew as it proceeded; it was joined by learned men from Mongolia and India.

All the gloomy sanctity of the temple went with the lama. Along paths used to caravans laden with brick tea and bales of silk, priests swung their fearsome tambourines: two human skulls, joined at the crown and covered in hide.

In the lama's palanquin, on his right, a wonderful skull goblet inlaid in gold with a bulging gold lid. It stood on a triangular base of black marble; at its three corners the goblet was supported by little stone human heads in red, blue and black.

From time to time when they made a halt for prayers, trumpets of human bones blew that ended in bronze fittings with flared nostrils. Their tone recalled the whinnying of the horse that carries souls to paradise.

In front of the itinerant men of learning who walked along in pointed yellow hats of felt with fleecy tassels hanging down behind, enormous yaks pulled huge, ineffably intricate prayer wheels on carts.

A small contingent of native Tanguts and fifteen hundred Imperial soldiers guarded the train. They pushed on to the northeast, past the blue lake called Tsomawang where the god dwells on the lake bottom in a turquoise tent.

The icy summit of Kailas, the holy mountain, towered vast above them. After many days they reached the snowfields and mountains that lead to Kokonor. Then the dreaded northern gales set in. The holy train, descending to valleys, winding over ridges, met at every

turn traces of the white death, animal carcasses, human skeletons. Here on every pass supplicating pennants, bones were laid out for the terrible gods.

And the terrible gods gave escort to the pious travellers from Tashilunpo. Yamantaka, most frightful of spirit gods, shrieked voracious in a storm across the boundless solitude of the paths and fell on yaks, mules and men, he of the bull's horns and the pyramid of nine heads, sixteen legs, thirty-four arms. Iron spears hissed from his flailing arms, he tore the flesh from human bodies, devoured their hearts, guzzled their blood, he who spread terror from the fastness he could leave through sixteen gates. He could do nothing to the priests and holy men: the Dragsed, women of Hell, conjured by the magicians gave him combat.

They trudged slowly through these frightful regions. With prayers of thanksgiving they crossed into the province of Amdo, close to the frontier with the Imperial province of Kansu. Then they arrived at the marvellous monastery town of Kunbum nestling in its valley. The house of the reformer of the Yellow Hat church, the holy Tsong Kapa, founder of the Sect of Virtue, still slumbered under the lovely sandalwood tree. To the east a rampart of ice and snow.

The yellow god dallied here through the winter. The world had a new pivot. The streams of pilgrims and caravans terminated here. A Mongol chieftain on whose head Paldan Ishe laid a hand presented him with three hundred horses, seventy mules, a hundred camels, a thousand bolts of brocade, a hundred and fifty thousand taels of silver. For the poorest and the poor he placed his hand a thousand times a day on saffron-coated paper. The land lapped blissfully at this God who spent himself so lavishly on it.

Then winter and the first spring days were past. An honour guard ten thousand strong made its way to the Tibetan holy man. Sixty days more it took for the miracle-bearing caravan with its escort of Imperial princes and the lama archbishop of the empire, the Changkya Hutuktu, to overcome the western provinces, the Great

Wall, Dolonor and approach the marble-gleaming songfilled pleasure palace of Jehol. The great lama needed no parasol bearer once in the Imperial park: on low painted poles silk cloths, precious billowing embroideries were hung across the path down which the Most Reverend would proceed between black cypresses tall as the sky, slender thuyas. Red and white lotus flowers lay on the glistening brown earth that his feet must tread.

But the Tashi-lama remained standing at the iron gate. He declined to trample the flowers. He stood for almost half an hour in the balmy air in front of the open entrance. Everything was delayed. Hastily the paths inside were swept clear of petals. Paldan Ishe observed the work in sadness, and the abbots and learned men behind him stood there with bowed heads, pained at so barbarous a reception.

And then when the Tibetan pope saw a little heap of swept-up lily corpses by the side of the path next to a cypress trunk he could not forebear to halt in his tracks with a sort of horror, go over to the hillock and in sight of the glittering Imperial household, the singing, pennant-waving choirs to kneel down, stroke flower after flower with his blessing hands.

A broad avenue led directly to the palace. As the procession came into view, preceded by gongbeaters and trumpeters, a solitary man dressed in yellow silk hastened down marble steps from the terrace. The throng cleared a way as far as the Tashilama. Between two of the giant cypresses Ch'ien-lung and Lobsang Paldan Ishe came face to face, the lean, greybearded Lord of the Yellow Earth and the large, rather stout pope on whose face a shadow of sadness lay. On his head was the tall mitre; his ceremonial robe of gold thread was embroidered over and over with Buddhas and saints at prayer. At his breast were two padded sleeves with white false hands, folded. Ishe was the incarnation of a many-armed Buddha.

Forty paces Ch'ien-lung took towards the bronzehued man with the soft lips and gleaming calm eyes. They bowed to one another; the music fell silent.

Softly the Yellow Lord breathed thanks that Heaven had granted

him the joy of this moment before he died, bade the holy man welcome, made to bow deeply before him.

But the Most Reverend took him by the elbows, stepped, so they might proceed, to the Emperor's side. The Emperor was confused and stood there moving his lips. Then they walked on accompanied only by fan bearers, up three marble steps, across the terrace and into the room prepared for the spiritual lord, from whom Ch'ien-lung at once took his leave.

Days were crowded with visits, return visits, banquets, exchanges of presents. In one side wing of the palace a hall had been adapted, quite secluded, open on three sides, connected with the main building only by one wall with a door in it. In this airy room, in the centre of which three chairs rose out of a thick carpet, the conversations of the holy man with the Yellow Lord took place in the presence of the Changkya Hutuktu, twice without his attendance.

An altar with a gigantic statue of a sitting Buddha in gold gazed across at the three chairs. On the raised centre chair the Panchen Rinpoche, the most reverend and brightest jewel of learning from the Mountain of Mercy in Tibet, inclined now right, now left to whisper religious words of the utmost secrecy into the ear of the Emperor and the archbishop. One day the Changkya was called away by Mongolian caravans that had journeyed to the outskirts of Jehol, to act as judge of final appeal in some disputes; this was with Ch'ien-lung's secret permission. The Emperor could tolerate an empty chair for two days.

As usual during these conversations the hall was surrounded at thirty paces by Imperial Life Guards; the three adjoining rooms were locked, sentries posted at the doors of the farther rooms. Ch'ien-lung turned his chair half away from the middle chair, so that he sat almost facing the Panchen Lama and with his back half turned on the altar by the window. Paldan Ishe let his head droop reflectively on his breast, with the fingers of his exposed right hand told off rosary beads: little irregular white balls of human bone, set with precious stones.

Before he emerged from his contemplation Ch'ien-lung, who had folded his arms, began to speak: "Your Holiness has granted me, unworthy as I am, so much; my soul is soothed. I am Emperor, to be sure, but only a man. I am the Son of Heaven, but the intimacy of your relations with the great powers that rule the world leaves me trembling. Sometimes I write poems; my academy, the brilliant Forest of Quills, has praised them. It is beyond my power, if Your Holiness will forgive me, to approach you on some human plane. The people in your land of herdsmen and black tents may be accustomed to you, your mildness, your overwhelming intellect; it is beyond me to dream, to turn into poetry, either you yourself or what you have said to me."

"Your Majesty is the protector of my wretched little land of snow. We occupy a tiny corner of the house which Your Majesty protects. Sakyamuni ended his life's course in the southern lands. It has been given to my country, sealed behind its gates of ice, to tend his eternal doctrines. The spirits are with us. The reincarnations of our precious Buddha are witnessed by barren mountains that spit out death and exhale cold like one of the prophesied icehells."

"Earth does not shake at this exhalation. All mouths gasp for the air that emanates from these deathspitting mountains."

"Your Majesty is a wise, pious warrior. You seek to win lands that belong to you. Tibet has long had sincere and peaceful relations with the Pure Dynasty."

"I am not pious. I have striven to think as Your Holiness says. It has been hard for me: one can't be Emperor and pious at the same time. No, be easy; I assure you it is so. I should have been murdered long ago had I been pious in your sense for only half an hour. I strive. And that's why I entreated you to come and talk to an old man."

"I am devoted to the eastern lord. The snares he has fallen into are great. I weep with him when he is beset with fears."

"Panchen Rinpoche, what was that wealthy Indian almsgiver called, of whom you told the learned Hutuktu and me yesterday? The pious man approached the Victorious Completed One, had a

monastery built for him near She-wei, the City of Hearing; there, you said, the son of Sakya wrote countless holy books."

"I spoke of Anathapindika."

"I am called Ch'ien-lung, and am a thousand times richer than Anathapindika of She-wei. You couldn't count all the things I possess. I lay before you, Panchen Rinpoche, whatever you will. I'll build monasteries for you such as you've never seen; my masons, architects, painters will give their all. I'll transfer to you possession of neighbouring cities, the entire province in which you dwell. Stay a little while in my country. Your Tibet can spare you; that land is full to bursting with holiness. Others who need you go hungry. I don't need to paint the beauty of my provinces for you. You too are old, Panchen Rinpoche; the Lobsang Paldan Ishe whose body you now inhabit could warm himself in the land of the Dragon's Son. The victorious completed Gautama didn't scorn such gifts. I think like one of you believers when I say: your Holiness blesses me in accepting my gift."

"What does the Lord of the East want with the body of Paldan Ishe?"

"Don't look so darkly, Panchen Rinpoche. You're not about to be detained. My government is quite convinced of your country's friendly disposition. This is not politics: believe me, Your Holiness."

"I trust in Ch'ien-lung's forbearance."

The Emperor looked at the pale red pattern of the carpet. The holy man's ardent gaze rested on his face; chasms yawned beneath its lines.

"Sit up straight, Ch'ien-lung. Speak more plainly."

"It is easy to speak of. In the Eighteen Provinces, as everywhere, there are charlatans. A man from Shantung, a fisherman's son from some village on the coast, has founded a sect he calls Wu-wei. This Wang Lun has committed many crimes: murders, robberies. He quarrels with a part of his following, who give themselves an immodest name, raise rebellion in a northern province, are defeated in part, in part immure themselves in a quarter of a western town. It is here, Paldan Ishe, Panchen Rinpoche, that the crime occurred

from which I am still reeling, still can find no peace. Before troops reached the town the thousands of people, men and women, shut up in the Old Town were slain one night in a manner more horrible than this land's history has ever known. How it happened, whether they drank poisoned water or demons fell on them, I have no idea. It seems that the criminal Wang Lun murdered his former adherents in a confusion of revenge and arrogance. My officers haven't been able to catch the egregious man. I have to ask myself, however, what I have done that such horrors should appear in the evening of my reign. I must know what I stand accused of by such an obvious indictment."

"Ch'ien-lung, you have grown old. In earlier days the death throes of whole populations failed to reach your ears. Now the cries of a few thousand dying people are enough to give you sleepless nights."

"I do not ask for indictments from you."

"I'm not indicting you. You live in the world of the flesh. It gives me pleasure to hear of your sleepless nights."

"That's no help to me, Panchen Rinpoche. You mustn't let it rest with these few words. I am Emperor of the mightiest realm in the world; I haven't sat on the throne like a puppet, but have striven for the fame and wealth of my dynasty. You mustn't take me for a man like this one or that, seek to drag me along ordinary paths. Help is what I need from you, Panchen Rinpoche. You stand in a relationship of incomprehensible, unspeakable nearness to the world's profoundest, most fearsome things; the spirit of a Buddha lodges in you; you're the only one I have been able to touch, hold, see, hear and trust since my best son was taken from me. Think that I am nonetheless Emperor of the Middle Realm; don't burden me with the impossible."

"Majesty, what you say is music to my ears. You don't need any help from a sceptre-bearing lama. You are emerging from the Samsara, having heard the call."

"I am Emperor. I don't live in a Samsara. I don't seek a path to Buddha: my empire is good, to me it was never, and is not now, a Hell. Paldan Ishe, don't stop up your ears. I am begging you."

“Don’t stop up your ears, Ch’ien-lung! How can awareness rise in men if not from unease, anxieties, nocturnal wanderings, from the wringing of hands, cries for help to the four quarters.”

“Oh you are cruel. I thought you an ocean of gentleness and am disappointed.”

“Let me weep with you. And let me pray that you remain strong and that it doesn’t drain from you.”

Ch’ien-lung, in despair, had knocked his forehead against the golden chairarm. His shoulders and arms heaved jerking at the groaning expansion of his ribcage. He was no longer aware of the Tashi-lama’s presence. A sense of grey abandonment overwhelmed him.

The holy man took the mitre from his head. His shaven skull was dewed with fine drops of sweat. In the silence, broken only by the Yellow Lord’s snuffling breath, minutes grew to long hours. The quiet was preserved by no more than a little husk, thin as a rubber membrane; beyond it pressed a gaseous mixture that threatened at any moment to rip through the husk. Panchen Rinpoche rustled to the altar, grasped his prayer sceptre, threw himself down. When he stood and looked around, Ch’ien-lung’s piercing troubled gaze was fixed on him. The holy man stepped hesitantly back; slowly he put the mitre with its Buddha images back on his head. He bowed to the Yellow Lord, who sat bolt upright, face revealing the great warrior Emperor; said, “If it please Your Majesty, I go now to my devotions.”

“I beg Your Holiness to favour me tomorrow with instruction.”

“I shall devise a task and beseech the Changkya Hutuktu to occupy himself with the Mongolian caravans tomorrow as well.”

The next afternoon at the same hour Ch’ien-lung and Paldan Ishe entered the hall of the three chairs. A massive ornament gleamed in front of the holy man’s chair. Smooth black tripod of wood with a circular top painted green, wide as a man’s outstretched arm. On this disc the miniaturist’s art had built a wonderful city of glinting metal, precious stones and brightly coloured materials. Within the encircling wall houses crowded with upswung roofs. Memorial

arches, temples; broad avenues quartered the city, in which a high holiday was being celebrated, numerous banners waved from painted poles, magnificent prayerwheels had been pulled into the streets. In the centre rose a hall with a dome of smooth crystal. Four steps led to a hushed, pillarfringed room: a golden deity kept silence within. It was a model of the City of Gods on the world mountain Sumeru.

After the formulaic exchange of greetings and thanks the two rulers sat down side by side. Yellow sunlight fell slanting through the hall.

The Yellow Lord appeared lively, expansive. Paldan Ishe's breastpiece glittered: a Kalmuck present, a blue halfmoon-shaped brooch; little chains that hung from it supported two round plates of silver inlaid with coral, rock crystal and little pearls. The chains ended in long silken tassels that dangled in the great lama's lap.

The Panchen spoke first: "The learned Changkya Hutuktu laments that his duties once again keep him from his appointment with you and me."

Ch'ien-lung laughed. "I consider it quite disrespectful of the learned Hutuktu. Some other spiritual judge could perhaps be found for the caravans and cattleherds. Your Holiness will permit me to express sympathy at the presumption of such a servant, who has grown accustomed in my realm to too great an independence. You have only to say the word, and I'll make arrangements for his punishment."

"So, the Changkya Hutuktu didn't feel quite secure in leaving you and me alone?"

"Your Holiness doesn't know Ch'ien-lung. In one respect I haven't aged a single year: in my delight in fine, bright summer weather. On such days I feel only Heaven above me, and I'm convinced that It means well with me. Paldan Ishe, on such days Ch'ien-lung needs no advice; today he's brimming with happiness because the flower of the snow country is here to share it."

"I doubt what use I can be to Your Majesty. The sun and bright days are lovely, but they're superfluous. I hope Your Majesty won't

say such things to me."

"What should I say to Your Holiness? Should I begin like yesterday, and drag the unease of my night into this lovely day? You'd look at me with sympathy but would urge, 'Good, good, more, more!' Because you don't want to understand that old man as I am, I cannot learn new wisdom. It's a lovely day; I sincerely regret not being able to receive the wise Hutuktu. Let you be sole instructor, Panchen Rinpoche."

"Where a river undermines its banks one does not lightly erect a pagoda."

"I wish, Panchen Rinpoche, that the Hutuktu were with us to hear you. Aren't you a murderer in your sympathy for me, in your desire to save me? I praise this day that sets me on my feet and makes me happy again after your harsh 'No' of yesterday. But the sun mustn't shine and the larks mustn't sing, because for you they're superfluous. You don't know, Panchen, what you mean to me, how I waited for you these last months! The sight of you in the garden made me tremble; it affected me as if a sort of judgement were closing in on me. I was mistaken, and shall act as if I'd merely received a visit from the ruler of Tibet, who is about to offer me inordinate quantities of presents."

"Beat against me."

"I shall remain as I am, unaltered. My forefathers thought as I do. We worship you without having the strength to follow you. Yes, there's an icebreath about your teaching."

"I have prayed for you to Amithaba. If I thought I could kindle that little light that bums in you, then forgive me. Be the poor little man Ch'ien-lung, Emperor of the Middle Realm."

"I am ruler of the greatest empire in the world, and I do not want to change. I was born the Son of Heaven and shall die upon the Dragon Throne."

"If you won't rue this lovely day and if it won't darken the sunlight for you, I should like to ask Your Majesty about the things that troubled you yesterday. Why did Your Majesty's troops drive those thousands of people into the Mongolian town where they met

their end?”

“Those people were rebels, Paldan Ishe, who calumniated my dynasty, founded a kingdom of their own in my northern province. They had a mendacious way of putting into practice the holy Wu-wei, the non-resistance of Lao-tzu. Instead of tending fields, raising children, they roamed the countryside; begged, seldom prayed, yearned for the Western Paradise. Because they claimed to have acquired supernatural powers through their union with fate, thousands of honest men and countless women streamed to them from every side. My officials couldn’t simply stand by and watch. They tried to disperse them. Some sections of the population also found the movement threatening. And this was the beginning of their end.”

“I am not yet clear as to the beginning. But the end I know: Ch’ien-lung has grown uneasy. Who thought it a good idea to attack the sectarians? They themselves, as Your Majesty remarked, attacked no one.”

“The name of the mandarin was not made known to me.”

“That has nothing to do with it.”

“This is no crime, Your Holiness: to drive men who’ve abandoned wives and children back to their homes, to whip sons who’ve forgotten the service of their ancestors back to a sense of duty. Fields must be ploughed, sown; taxes must be raised for the upkeep of the commonwealth. When wives, who should be a shadow and an echo in the house, run about with sectarians, then they should be made to kneel on little chains. Immodest wives and concubines who leave their homes to do whore’s duty among people who shamelessly call themselves ‘brother’ and ‘sister’ should be punished according to the custom of the region: buried alive, sewn into sacks and drowned, killed with eight cuts.”

“All this is right. I say nothing. I cannot understand how such a splendid beginning could lead to such a lamentable end.”

“No, Panchen Rinpoche, that remains a mystery. Criminals should be dealt with exactly as I’ve said. And yet it’s like a head that only now looked grave and dignified and suddenly twists its mouth and

eyes like a tiger and roars. What is this head, Panchen Rinpoche? Why does it gape at me?"

"Let it be, Ch'ien-lung. Put away your soul. I raise my sceptre. The Buddha Sakyamuni has unveiled the causes of existence and of your quandary. In the first light of dawn, Knowledge came to the king's son of Kapilavastu before his mound. She knitted cause together with cause; I take the threads, loosen the knot. The sects wandered in darkness, sought Buddha and found him. You fell upon men and women. You have created a thousand restless ghosts. You have unnaturally prolonged the chain of their rebirths. No one can sleep when a thousand wailing, accusing ghost-knuckles rap by night on door and post. Ch'ien-lung, you must place cause beside cause."

"What must I do to break the chain? I know my ancestors disapprove of something here. But I can't bring these people back to life. I didn't know these sectarians. I'll arrange sacrifices for them."

The holy man laughed. Reflectively he stroked the silken tassels of his breastpiece. "How utterly different lands and peoples are. Ten days journey to the east of Tibet everything has changed, and no one knows of the destruction of worlds, or of the cycle of birth and death. The Hundred Families you call yourselves: not even death shatters a family; your ancestors remain with you. How smooth, how polished, bowed in domestic comfort over the earth. A stick of incense atones for this plunge into the cascade of rebirths. A dish of butter compensates a soul for a millennium of prolonged torment. So, sacrifice to the ghosts of these dead in your own way. Erect wayside shrines for them. Spare the remainder of the Wu-wei sect."

"My head is empty, finds no firm ground. You want to help me, you want to help me!"

"The day is lovely again. To be mild, to be calm; such is the hand that frees every bolt. Come to me, old man, find yourself before you die."

The old Yellow Lord stared before him. "The most reverend gentleman from the Mountain of Mercy has a soft, gentle way of loosening threads. I shall take sacrifices of atonement to my ancestors; I shall go to the tombs at Mukden. Contrive atonement

for Wang Lun and his burdened adherents. K'ang-hsi, Yung-cheng wish it."

Ch'ien-lung straightened his back. The pope of the yellow church drew his rosary of bones through his right hand; his face was turned towards the Emperor.

The Emperor was surrounded by the shades of his powerful ancestors. They pressed upon his highdrawn shoulders, they scrutinized their drooping descendant. The Emperor squirmed: these were K'ang-hsi, Yung-cheng, who should accept him into their quiet circle. Through their mist shone the bronzed frank visage of the holy man of Tashilunpo.

In confusion and trembling the Yellow Lord tottered to his feet, stood before the stranger, pulled his silken sleeve. "You, Paldan Ishe, are the sceptre-bearing lama. Ch'ien-lung is afraid. Have you advised him well?"

They had managed to follow the trail of Wang Lun the criminal for no more than a week after the events in Yangchou. He ran in broad daylight through western towns; no one dared come near him. This man of giant strength threw unsuspecting passers-by aside; superior forces he eluded by his cunning. He was last seen about the time of the first snowfall in Hochien, to the west of the Imperial Canal, outside the walls of this populous city.

Since then he had not been seen in the northern province. Neither that winter nor the following summer was anything heard of Wang Lun. Even among the brothers and sisters there circulated only vague rumours of him. Ngo, the former captain of the Imperial guard, seemed to know the most of Wang's whereabouts; it was Ngo that Wang met outside the walls of Hochien. From him it was learned that Wang was alive; he conceded now and then in a hesitant manner that Wang would soon appear again, but as soon as talk turned to the founder of the Wu-wei sect Ngo fell silent, looked away and was despondent.

Wang Lun had quit the northern province two days after learning

from Ngo details of the Broken Melon's downfall. The tale had travelled faster than Wang, who had had to lay up for a whole day. Lanky Ngo knew little of the circumstances; some of what he was told he forgot under the dreadful weight of the whole.

When Wang stood before him, his face haggard, eyes bloodshot, transformed into a demon of revenge and battle, just brain and arm for his infamous Yellow Leaper, Ngo was so alarmed that Wang had to hold him fast by the jacket.

They walked along under the wall. In a broken prison cage used by beggars as a night shelter they sat while Wang waited for Ngo to calm down. Then Ngo answered his questions, softly, flinching at the sound of his own voice, several times asking, "What is to become of you, Wang?"

Ngo was able to give some account of the turmoil that night in the Mongolian town, the attempts of some brothers to flee, deathleaps over the outer walls. He had more details of how the townsfolk entered the upper town at break of day. He knew the names of the leader of the former town guards and others, names of the exorcising bonzes. When Wang heard that not a single one of the besieged had survived the night he let out his breath, beat his breast groaning, sat there cast in bronze.

Then, as gusts of wind scattered loose snow over them from the cage bars, Wang asked whose fate had been particularly commented on.

Ngo wouldn't speak at first, related some incidents without being able to attach names to them, described how lovely Liang-li had been found still alive. He talked himself into a state of agitation and ended plaintively with Ma No's death.

A piercing howl broke out from Wang; he grasped Ngo tight, blocked up his ears, turned away.

He ran from the cage through soft snow under the wall, pursued by Ngo. Wang howled without stopping, flung himself to the ground, beat the earth with his fists, pulled himself up. Finally they ran one behind the other to a little elevated spot. The screaming, drooling man sat down in the snow, raised his sword with both hands, swung

it steadily through the falling flakes from right to left, from left to right. He lowered it, moaning kissed the blade, cast strange looks at puzzled Ngo. He rolled over the ground, down the hill, painted a long crimson streak in the white snow from his bloodspurting hand, slit at the wrist. Ngo fell to whimpering; he shook the man, heaved him up, pressed snow to the wound, pulled Wang along, who twisted his head with its contorted face around in circles, dragged the battered sword behind him with his right hand like a child his little cart.

Close by a gate Ngo felt himself grabbed by the shoulder; Wang pushed him away panting with a wild look, stood there heaving, looked as he threw away his sword at the wide cut on the palm of his left hand, repulsed Ngo's endless whimpering. Ngo pulled a rag from his coat, bound up the red expanse. Quickly Wang made off without a word, without a backward glance.

Next day the gentle snow flurries ceased; through a dazzling landscape shimmered the tinkling of sleds, happy laughter. The plain outside the gate was flecked black with strolling men and children. Under the wall Ngo and Wang squeezed past the beggars who lay in rows displaying mutilated limbs, shovelling from tubs the dogrice that welfare organizations gave them. Beyond the prison cage it was quieter. They continued, not speaking, along the foot of the wall.

A pipeseller, a tall fellow, walked past them. The bamboo tubes he carried on his shoulder grazed Wang on the neck with their whitebrass sumps; Wang started and turned round. He cast an evil look at the hawker, who continued unconcerned over the snow. On the elevation they had climbed during the snowfall a throng of children stood, boys in bright caps; a tambourine jangled. In the circle of children leapt a man with a chained black bear. The man shook the furcovered frame over his head, on his back, twirled about. The bear walked gingerly around him, upright, tried to touch the man's shoulder with his forepaw. The children screamed.

Wang, relaxing visibly, said that the news of Ma No's fate had affected him more deeply than he'd have believed. It was like a

rockfall he'd seen once in the gorges: two survivors had sat there and laughed and laughed. It was just like that with him. He spoke some more in this fashion, in an unnaturally calm matter-of-fact tone.

When Ngo, whose agitation was returning and who didn't feel up to excitement, asked what Wang intended to do, the great beggar smiled a strange sad smile and looked vacantly before him. They turned back. And when they reached the top of the merry children's hill, Wang hugged his brother and they walked arm in arm.

It had all turned out so incalculably, said Wang; he had no desire any more to change things or bring anything about or do anything of any consequence at all. He led Ngo, who followed uneasily and didn't understand him, along the hill to watch the beardance. At the sight of these ragged figures the children drew back in silence; the tambourine man pulled his sullen growling beast behind his back. The two men turned away with a dismissive gesture.

Yes, he was happy, Wang continued. It was all incalculable, but finally Ma No had been proved right. He'd warned at the Talu swamp against using Yellow Leaper; it would offend against the teaching of non-resistance. Because he, Wang Lun, was of a different opinion they'd parted company. Then the calamity in the Mongolian town was conjured up. In the end the sword rebounded on his own breast; it was useless to resist. Ma No prophesied his fate and he'd denied it.

Ngo objected: what reason then was there for laughing and being happy.

As much reason, said Wang, his eyes shining, as anyone has who's suddenly been taught a fundamental lesson about himself, as if a skin has been peeled from him. You feel content. You feel ground beneath your feet. You know where you are with yourself.

Wang was clearly too distracted, elated, diverted left and right to speak much. Later he chattered, but such strange trivialities that Ngo was astonished. Wang showed interest in the sleds, made fun of the tottering ladies and the fops swanking along in their wake, told tales of swindles. Ngo observed how Wang's exhausted face took on

new, astonishing features. A peasant joker, another man with another voice, shambled beside him.

On a sudden whim of Wang's they sat down with a couple of beggar groups at the gate, threw dice with them. Ngo was alert for a peculiar gesture, a look of pain from Wang, but Yellow Leaper's guardian seemed ever more at ease among these greedy, idle, filthy riffraff. He was cheerful and relaxed, spread his limbs, paid no attention to Ngo.

When he took onto his lap a grimy creature, the common property of the beggar band, Ngo stood up in disgust. In gnawing confusion he slipped off towards the gate.

At the entrance Wang and the girl caught up with him. Both were shaking with laughter. Wang had told her how the captain had left the Emperor's service because of a catamite. The girl was ready to break up in her delight at the crazy fellow and squealing she asked Ngo the boy's name, at the same time touching her index finger to her forehead. Ngo strode quickly into the town. He heard Wang call behind him, "Farewell, dear brother! We'll meet again in the Western Paradise," and jostle the gate guard to amuse the girl.

After these events the brothers lost sight of him entirely. Ngo kept quiet about the encounter. When the Imperial decrees appeared, and Wang Lun from Hunkang-ts'un, Hailing, Shantung was promised total amnesty and toleration for his doctrines, the former leader of the sect was settled on his smallholding in the Lower Reaches, went fishing with cormorants; his wife knew him by the name of Tai. He was a shrewd man, respectful to the magistrate, comradely, not quite dependable in his dealings. In matters of the spirit he did as all peasants do: prayed to the gods who promised him the greatest advantage. Of all the migrants of the past few years come to strengthen the Great Dyke against spring floods, Tai was the most esteemed.

Within a few weeks the prefects of districts and towns in Chihli and Shantung learned how strangely the outrage in Yangchou-fu had

affected the Yellow Lord.

Further persecution of adherents of the sect was prohibited simultaneously by the Board of Rites and the civil and military authorities. An Imperial edict to the Tsungtus and prefects of the circuit revealed how completely the highest authorities had changed their attitude towards the movement. Magistrates and literati in the western part of Chihli were punished with severe fines and demotions for having submitted false reports on the nature of the sectarians. The Court of Astrologers in the Vermilion City let it be known that the outrage in Yangchou had resulted in difficult constellations for the Yellow Lord.

In literati circles, in the temples of Confucius, the thunderstruck sat together. One thing was certain: this change of attitude on the part of the Emperor dated from the visit to the Imperial court in Jehol of the Lama Paldan Ishe. The irregular provenance of this deviation from the heresy laws was remarked on: no indication of memorials from the Court of Censors; the Astrological Bureau had brought up the rear, so the initiative hadn't come from that source. "Lamaism at court": that old pregnant alarm call roused the conservative elements; they stirred themselves. Whispers circulated of the old ruler's gloomy disposition, of an abuse of dark senile moods by mystical priests.

Pogroms against the Truly Powerless erupted with extraordinary ferocity. The decree was made public in scarcely a quarter of the land, for form's sake pasted up on walls overnight, torn down by hired ruffians. Embittered meetings, discussions, resolutions of the Confucians ensued. In western Chihli the first clashes occurred. In several places brothers were struck down and flogged. Often they scattered; martyrdom drew new believers.

In the fateful region of Talu swamp were two bands. Hemmed in by their odious persecutors, swept along by a few desperate men they defended themselves, indeed in a blind passion gave veritable battle to the attackers which ended in victory for the sectarians. This was the beginning of a demented pogrom against wandering bands in the region. To the north of Peking, in southeastern Chihli the

same thing occurred. Local authorities independently organized attacks on them. Here and there lamaic priests were assaulted.

Chia-ch'ing, strong princely Chia-ch'ing, did not doubt that his father was mad, befuddled by the insidious Tashi-lama. In his palace, before the eyes of Chao Hui and Song who were visiting him, he tore up a copy of the conciliatory decree. When news came of spreading rebellion his eyes glinted with pleasure. He was urged to declare for a faction. He could count for support on all friends of Confucius, all true patriots who observed with loathing the victory of the yellow gowns at court. He kept his own counsel; but after one such angry exchange he threw the key to his treasury to his head gardener. Now something astonishing happened: the authorities in the provinces abruptly ceased their actions. Thereupon the sect grew as never before, and the adherents seemed seized all together of a tumult of fury, a madness of bloodlust that swept away all meekness in one great wave. The eunuchs in Chia-ch'ing's service had stealthily caused several thousand demobilized soldiers to be hired in various places, with orders to join the Truly Powerless and await orders from Peking. In a few weeks the sect had undergone a terrible change.

With great skill two acts of terror were arranged from Peking: an attempt on the life of general Chao Hui's only son, and an apparent attack on Mukden while the Emperor was in residence. Chao Hui, now in the Emperor's entourage, was incensed at the disgrace to his house; Lao-hsü recovered only slowly. The general dragged his misfortune along by the Emperor's side.

The preoccupied Emperor was an eyewitness to the outrage perpetrated by the sectarians in Mukden. From his garden he saw the tonguing flames that lapped at a pagoda and a memorial arch he himself had erected in honour of his mother. He also heard the death cries of the sectarians—poor soldiers who had been promised large sums of money for their families, and an expensive funeral.

He left the Manchu tombs, journeyed to Jehol. Reluctantly he opened reports despatched by the Tsungtus: rebellion, open rebellion was in the land.

Deathly silence in the Imperial residence as the reports were laid before the Son of Heaven. He remained in seclusion. At noon on the following day he climbed alone and bent into the Hall of Ancestors, where he stayed until evening. Ch'ien-lung felt limp and miserable. He feared the approach of death at any moment. That horrible ghostface from the Mongolian town hadn't altered its features. He couldn't change it. He couldn't atone to his ancestors. His life was ending in shame. Heaven had cast this over him. This ending was ordained.

And during these days when the old Yellow Lord was turned in on himself to wrest an outburst of anger from his soul, he was struck by a blow aimed at him from his own house.

In a clique that assembled in a house in Peking for the furtherance of gossip, intrigue, the staging of theatrical performances, a leading role was played by a woman named P'ei, whose past was known to few of the distinguished visitors to the house.

Madam P'ei claimed to be the daughter of a mill owner in the west called P'ei Szu-fu; orphaned at an early age, she'd been packed off to a suburb of Peking where she was adopted and raised by a retired mandarin. This elegant creature certainly had the graces of the educated classes, spoke purest kuan-hua; only now and then committed solecisms in elementary matters, misunderstood literary allusions. This didn't happen very often, since for the most part she cultivated an extraordinary reserve. No one from the suburb of Peking in which she had in fact been "raised" would have recognized in the striking and clever Madam P'ei the little house slave of a widowed barber Yeh, in whose squalid house she added to the dirt, suffered daily beatings from the barber's neglected offspring and came close to starving. She ran away, and it seems she worked at first in the kitchens of one of the painted houses along the Canal, then, having picked up the rudiments, took higher vows and was accepted into the society of the mandarin-ducks.

She did not, however, rise to become a queen of the flowers and

willows in her quarter. At the age of eighteen she contracted an eye ailment, and though she donated many gifts to the once reliable Goddess of Eyesight, brought silver spectacles with ivory sidepieces, only the right eye healed, leaving large white spots on the left that greatly reduced Miss P'ei's market value.

She used all her refined flirtatiousness to induce a wealthy judicial officer to take her as his concubine. She wanted to escape the painted house. Only two and a half years later she left the judge's residence, having received a severance payment from his legitimate wife.

Now Madam P'ei occupied a little house with several servant girls, lived in retirement, now and again received visitors, consorted only with families of distinguished name. In her room she relived her memories. She had not been altogether averse to entertaining gallants in the painted establishment. She set out smoking bowls of incense in which every day she burned amber, the saliva of dragons. Every morning she took her usual bowl of ginger soup. Even her warm wine she drank alone, wine on wine, drunkenness on drunkenness, as the saying goes. The servants had no idea what Madam got up to half the day in her locked room. When they heard her trilling and strumming the yüeh-ch'in, they became curious.

When Madam clapped to be made up and dressed for her afternoon visits and despite all her dignity was seen to be excitable, happy, restless, they began thinking. Conversations with the neighbours strengthened their suspicions, which amounted to nothing less than that Madam P'ei was a Wu, a sorceress, who cosseted ghosts up in her room.

The young woman noticed the girls' timid whispering. A flower woman brought the rumour to her ears, and Madam P'ei grew thoughtful. On an idle caprice she took up the strange augury, went to a renowned Wu, who cawed himself hoarse laughing: so she nurtured soft memories of the flowery lane, and people thought her a practising witch! You could not summon shades with tenderness! She begged him to instruct her in a sorcerer's invocations and usages, just a little; she only wanted to drive fears from others; she'd

be frightened to summon a real shade. Since she put down a hefty deposit the canny Wu accepted the deal, promised he wouldn't show her the least little shade, only conjure one up in the vicinity.

And so she learned to name the various kinds of spirits, ghosts, demons, to distinguish their characteristics, their transformations into werewolves, foxes, rat demons, how to capture and unmask them, how to employ ashes, amulets, papers, swords, water.

Hovering between shudders and caresses she remained the respectable young Madam P'ei, rich enough to indulge her whims. In the circles she frequented she never denied the secret mutterings behind her back. She was patient, waited for the moment to reveal her powers, for she hungered after influence in these spheres.

Now the ladies' salon was joined by a Mrs Ying, pretty as a picture, who was in service with an Imperial princess. The trimness of her figure was rivalled only by her lack of brains. Madam P'ei kept her distance, for she became bitter in the presence of beauty. Mrs Ying gaped in astonishment when she found out about her fascinating powers. She pressed herself on the surprised lady, questioned her about it, paid visits to her apartment, woooed the cool P'ei, who played her along and condescended to her.

But Madam P'ei changed her demeanour at once when Mrs Ying climbed one day delightedly from her sedan chair, embraced her and conveyed an invitation to sip tea with the princess. Now P'ei returned most cordially the impetuous embraces of young Ying, who felt happy and secure in the company of a Wu. This first courtesy visit to the princess was followed by intimate meetings, and the suburban barber's grubby house slave stood on the threshold of a glittering career.

She found herself at Court in the Vermilion City among women and eunuchs who were mired in a swamp of superstitious entanglements. Before long the clever Madam P'ei was the centre of attention. Several princes showed up at the conventicles. Dark séances were held in locked rooms, ladies and gentlemen stood up smartly at the suggestion of this elegant woman with the confident movements, who secretly feared nothing more than that one of her

experiments might succeed.

Ch'ien-lung's favourite, Prince Pu-wang, was a free and easy daredevil. His sister wanted him to join their circle; he quickly spoiled the clandestine arrangements of Madam P'ei, whose supposedly evil looks he couldn't abide. He was easily brought to heel: the gentle and timid princess, shocked at his behaviour and pained at the sorceress' distress, persuaded P'ei to convince the young man with a practical demonstration. She offered to look the other way as the prince was made to fall for a crude trick. And the delighted woman consented half unwillingly to prophesy for the sneering Pu-wang an early morning encounter which the princess, under a sense of obligation to her insulted guest, took care to bring about. The prince's astonishment was matched by his ensuing humility and ambivalence towards his sister's protégée.

In his zeal the young man introduced the renowned Prince Mien-k'o to the magic circle, to which the chief eunuch also belonged. Mien-k'o, broad of shoulder, urgent, always in his general's uniform with the lion insignia on the breast, a swaggering, boorish fellow, felt extraordinarily honoured to be received into such unusual Company, sat with his overlarge head and open mouth in the upstairs room used for the séances. Ch'ien-lung hated this son, who stood out with his rough character and was kept in the background. When this squat, conceited man became aware of Madam P'ei's arts he did not, like Pu-wang, reject them but as the company made its way from the salon appeared silent, grimly excited, so that Pu-wang found the woman even more convincing.

In the warrior's muddled brain an idea took hold: to conquer Madam P'ei for himself and force her to place her talents at his disposal. Little Mrs Ying, who had been his concubine before her marriage, and chief eunuch Shang were startled to be overhauled by the prince's runners on the way to Madam P'ei, invited into his own sedan chair and, as they were borne through the streets, informed without preamble that Madam P'ei had offered to serve him and he was going to make use of her occult powers. Mrs Ying and Mr Shang had to help him secure the lady. They wouldn't lose by it. But the

sorceress had better be taken into safekeeping, because it was absolutely essential to guard against betrayal.

Mr Shang's protestations that there was nothing to fear as to the sorceress' willingness were hoarsely dismissed by the prince, who looked at them from swollen bull's eyes. It had to be done with resolution and force. You couldn't trust a spirit woman; at which Mrs Ying gave a determined nod.

And so that afternoon the curious affair took place. Madam P'ei, collected in all her finery by Mr Shang and Mrs Ying, was carried in the sedan Chair of Imperial Prince Mien to a secluded house in the Forbidden City, was led on her arrival to a back room, set upon by the hideous prince, bound and laid on the floor. He took the silk cloth from her mouth when, half choked, she indicated by wild shakes of the head that she wasn't going to scream. As she sat on the floor in her sumptuous furlined gown, snivelling quietly and fearing for her life, Mien stumped up and down in front of her, swished his ceremonial sabre and declared himself the protector of her life and her safety if only she'd place herself, without any reservations, at his disposal.

Madam P'ei had to support herself against the wall. She'd thought the dark prince was going to unmask her, and instead—desired her. This abduction was just like his headstrong ways. She pretended confusion, referred to her good family. The solid man propped himself on his weapon and summed up brutally, "Yes or no?" at which, although she found his appearance not especially pleasing, she whispered a tender Yes, cried again quietly and squinted across at him.

He explained in the same surly tone that she'd live there for a while, leave the house only in a sealed sedan in the company of Mr Shang and Mrs Ying. She didn't need to conjure spirits, summon shades, cure or cause sickness from a distance; she was just to be at his complete disposal. To which she assented with a sigh.

Mrs Ying was not a little astonished when she appeared that evening at her friend's locked room and the latter embraced her laughing. Madam P'ei told her she'd soon grow accustomed to these

new circumstances. At first she'd been afraid of the rude prince, but actually it was only his manner that was so frightening. What he wanted of her would of course cost her some spiritual difficulty, but —. And Mrs Ying, pleased, took up the 'but', urged her to take everything as it came, calmly and without fuss. The prince swore by her, but everything must stay a secret.

The next morning found lovehungry P'ei in a difficult position. Enlightened by the prince as to his not in the least amorous intentions, she had to conceal her disappointment and attend to the complexities of his plans. Mien's evil plot was to have a certain man, at a particular time, by some suitable means, fall ill and not too much later die. At the princess's apartment, in Mien's presence, Mrs P'ei had often boasted of such abilities, which every experienced Wu possessed. Now Madam P'ei wept in earnest and wouldn't be comforted by the prince. She wept for her lost beauty and how horribly everything had turned out. She was close to jumping up, striking the man, who was watching out for it, on the face and screaming out her inability. The whole business showed the prince in a foolish light which disgusted the spoiled woman. She wept on in fury, remembered her childhood in the barber's house and was slow to calm herself. The prince, who had left her alone, returned two hours later. She begged his forgiveness: a woman's heart could not easily attach itself to new things. Mien questioned her more closely about the methods one used to bewitch a distant person, bring about his death. She thought the simplest way would be to send him a potion, but this, after some reflection, Mien rejected: it seemed too dangerous. Couldn't she carry out his intentions without leaving her room? After considering a while Madam P'ei, brightening, declared that she could. She proposed to entice the spirit of the condemned man into a doll, bury the doll at the threshold of the man's apartments; before long the man would grow mad, kill himself or in some other way die quickly.

Mien swung his arms: it should be done. He made her repeat her vow to keep mum and gather her powers. If all went well she'd be rewarded with whatever she wanted; nothing would be denied her.

And so Madam P'ei, ensnared in this manner, was only a little startled when the monstrous man bent towards her, weapons clanking, to whisper in her ear, having pushed aside the string of pearls that dangled from her headdress: it was the Emperor she was to bewitch.

The trust accorded her in this circle had excited her before now. Now a passion coursed through her head, her eyes were dazzled. She made up her mind to succeed, to hold power.

In addition to Mrs Ying and the eunuch, who took pains to preserve the secret of P'ei's whereabouts, a lapidary was brought into the plot, a friend of the eunuch who often worked in the palaces of the Vermilion City. He was given four thousand taels by Prince Mien and a golden amulet representing the God of Longevity. Mrs P'ei commissioned him to carve a jade statue of the Emperor as big as an arm; he was to depict the Emperor lying down, wearing only a linen nightshirt. The further decking out of the doll she'd take care of herself.

It was more than five weeks later when the lapidary, working of necessity in secret, finished his task and one evening lifted a finely carved and stained booktrunk from his cart and carried it on his shoulder into the house occupied by Madam P'ei.

The doll of green nephrite was alarmingly like the Son of Heaven. The sleeping head lay on its right side; the mouth breathed slightly open; a flimsy garment flowed down to the bare feet and in restless sleep had slipped from the right shoulder, revealed a strong left ankle; the hands fell thickveined and heavy at either side. The glassy green stone was the image of a near corpse, and at the same time had an unearthly animation that welled from deep within the stone, almost speaking, fending off death.

The conspirators stood around the statue. Mien, sure of triumph, embraced the simple young lapidary, who looked proudly over his botched effort and wondered if a fold shouldn't have been placed a little differently.

Mrs Ying cried, slunk into a corner where they could hear her sniffling; even Madam P'ei, who at first had stared at the doll in

feigned calm, felt unwell. She sobbed, ran in fear from the room and had to be fetched back by Mrs Ying at the prince's bidding.

The next stage of the work fell to Madam P'ei. After she had got rid of her guests, it took several days before she was able to approach the doll with equanimity. Then the prince gave her the chance to observe Ch'ien-lung as he strolled among the magnolias and lily ponds of the Forbidden City. And little by little, with incantatory gestures, she absorbed from the man, as he pottered about, some part of his soul; today the spirit of the five viscera: liver, spleen, lungs, heart, kidneys; then the spirit of his eyes, brain. Every time she carried a little object in her closed left hand, the organ whose spirit she was bewitching: liver of blue wood, lungs of white metal, heart of flame-red silk. At home she squeezed the oval of material over the dreaming doll's body, breast, forehead; incense smouldered, the windows were curtained. Like a sponge the doll absorbed the spirits; the stone began to darken, the figure lost its translucency, brown nodules formed within it from which fine lines and fissures extended like veins into the limbs and sprouted over the skin.

After Madam P'ei, with one last painful burst of concentration, had brought home the Emperor's life spirit she locked up for five times five days the trunk in which the statue lay. Towards the end of this period perceptible groans and knocks emanated from within. Dark Prince Mien, the lapidary and pretty Mrs Ying leaned over the box as Madam P'ei, her knees now under control, dressed in a Wu-costume of red flames, tensed her arms and heaved open the lid. Warm vapour with a foul musty smell drifted from the trunk. Over her face Madam P'ei wore a snaketongued gilded godmask; her lively rouged hands grasped the doll, which abruptly, like a wild cat, she pressed to her bosom.

They all saw as they stood in a circle about the sorceress that the head of the statue was turned slightly to the front; the right eye had its lid drawn down in a wink; the folds of the gown lay smooth: the doll had stretched. Carefully the woman laid the figure onto the black felt of the table by the oil lamp, one finger always resting on

it. Trembling, hiccuping nervously Mrs Ying, frequently whimpering unawares, brought a delicate white mourning costume in which the sorceress quickly dressed the object.

It was nighttime; thick mist flowed over the silent palaces of the Forbidden City. In front of the Hall of Felicity, where the Emperor slept, the four conspirators felt their way to an ancient thuya tree under which Ch'ien-lung liked to sit. Quickly the prince and the lapidary dug a shallow hole with a shovel they had brought, placed the doll into it, clamped between two boards. The sorceress muttered a few words; a scratching came from the hole; earth was thrown over it.

They separated. It was done.

The doll would overpower the last remnants of Ch'ien-lung's soul in a choking struggle. The Emperor must die; the doll was bound tight, was unable to rise.

These events took place in the year of the Broken Melon. The Emperor seldom resided in the Forbidden City; the affair made little progress. Madam P'ei returned to her apartments in the town. Prince Mien was a not infrequent visitor; before long he became loud and threatening towards her, convinced that for fear of the Emperor she hadn't given her powers full rein. Once he struck the indignant woman so hard on the head that a doctor had to attend to the swelling.

She complained of her ill treatment to Mrs Ying and the lapidary, both of whom came and went often. Ying was visibly pleased at her misfortune, for she had grown jealous of Madam P'ei.

The lapidary was a sly, avaricious man who extorted large sums from the prince in this affair. When realization dawned in him how difficult it was he began to doubt the success of the enterprise, looked on P'ei as a moneygrubber like himself and attempted to secure his own safety in good time. Madam P'ei doubled up in fury at his suggestion that both of them ought to touch the prince for all he was worth, then he'd marry her and take her to his home town in Shansi. Rejected and offended he plotted revenge.

While he was working on a stone garland on the façade of a

pavilion by the southern lotus lake, he claimed one day to have mislaid a piece of jade of appreciable size. He made a report to the Supervisor of Building Works, who instituted an energetic search. The lapidary explained that the jade could have disappeared months ago. Thereupon he was flogged for his carelessness; and seeing now how stupidly he'd managed the affair to be punished right at the beginning, he shouted a confession of the whole plot.

The jade doll was unearthed by horrified Court officials, who sought to hush the matter up.

The soil beneath the thuya was found to be loose. Penetrating a little deeper they came upon a curious hollow like an air bubble, at the bottom of which the doll lay. The boards had burst apart in the middle and bulged upwards; the doll, its hands thrown up to its face, sat bending forwards. It was covered in white maggots as if it were a corpse.

A hunt ensued for Mesdames P'ei and Ying. Both had fled.

Prince Mien was found in his palace. He too tried to escape. After he had been informed by the Minister of Punishments, who had taken charge of the investigation, that until a decision could be obtained from the Emperor he was to keep to his palace, which was cordoned off, he demanded with a roar, almost bursting with rage, from whom the Minister had obtained authority to apply such measures to a prince of the blood. At the Minister's cool reply that he would accept responsibility the raging man heaved a ceremonial sword at his head, knocking off his cap with its peacock feather. The palace guard took up positions before the victim of the assault. The prince stepped close, swore most offensively at them, soundly boxed the ears of the captain, who did nothing to defend himself. Then looking out of the window and observing the strength of the guard around his house he withdrew quietly with venomous eyes into his bedchamber, inhaled gold leaf and suffocated.

Ch'ien-lung was receiving the Tashi-lama in Jehol when Prince Mien-k'o thus ended his life. The investigation was carried further on the orders of the Emperor, and gave rise to powerful suspicion of involvement by the princess and Prince Pu-wang.

This was the news that reached the Emperor in Jehol—where his attempts to placate his ancestors by atoning for the crime of Yangchou had come to naught—and dealt his soul a cruel blow. Letters arrived from Chia-ch'ing in which the prince consoled him, spoke of boundless affection for his father, urged that bitter misunderstandings might be permitted to be cleared up or forgotten. Ch'ien-lung, obsessed with the idea that he must soon die and stand unpurified before his ancestors, was impervious to such consolings. He fought for his position among his forefathers as he had never fought for a country. He saw himself abandoned left and right; sometimes he thought the land had spat him out. Mostly he stood solitary in a vast stony field and struggled with ghosts from which everyone fled.

He learned that Chihli was in flames from insurrection. He observed the rebellion with a cold calm face. What he wanted, his companions found out later than the court officials in Peking, whither Ch'ien-lung despatched letters, among them one conveying cool thanks to Chia-ch'ing: the Emperor desired to return speedily to Peking, in order to speak once more with the Tashilama before he set off on his homeward journey to Tibet.

In a small spruce wood north of Peking's Tatar city lay the monastery Huang-szu. Here dwelt the holy man from Tibet.

The journey from Jehol to Peking had been one long triumphal procession. Birds of worship whirred in black flocks about his mitre. When he settled into the little monastery of Huang-szu, a thousand magnetic arms seemed to grow out from the monastery walls to beckon worshippers. On the Emperor's orders a company of the Red Banner was stationed permanently around the exalted guest's dwelling place. They were powerless to hold back the throng.

Incalculable streams of humanity: wagons, carts, riders, mothers with babes, beggars, noblemen, vagabonds, a clashing and uniting of all gazes, bending of every knee before the wooden sceptre that the strong, sternly smiling lama raised at the courtyard gate.

Paldan Ishe, on foot, accompanied by two learned inmates of the monastery went in the mornings through back gates, strolled like a simple yellowgowned lama in a pointed hat. He visited Tunghuang-szu to the east, monastery of the Changkya Hutuktu, made a great excursion in his palanquin to the hunting park of Hsiangshan, west of lake K'unming. In radiant delight he walked through lovely groves of elms, mulberries. Marble bridges led across gorges and green brooks; slender deer ran past close by.

Dewdrops from the trees hung from his hat as he entered the monastery of the five hundred Lohans, was welcomed by the kowtowing abbot and the numerous chapter of monks. Here in a grotto the eighteen martyrs and nine rewards glimmered magnificently in bronze.

The holy man spent one night here in the secluded monastery of the Sleeping Buddha. When evening fell, he had been already many hours sunk in contemplation before the colossal statue. When he tore himself free he enjoyed the onset of soft, warm night under the horse chestnuts in the park, among the parturient dampness of the ponds. How blessed was this eastern land. It brimmed with people; the good law made progress among them. With remote, contented eyes the Tashi-lama surveyed the abundant beauties of these regions, without envy, like a donor, a patron who smiles and draws pleasure from the joy of others. Prayers and petitions, the secret complaints of the princes reached his ears. Even the warm air didn't improve things; the marble bridges were as light as breath, the tall fields of sorghum, rice paddies vanished in all their lushness at the raising of hand to forehead. What a good, hardworking, inscrutable race played here; how they lorded it over neighbouring peoples. But even the Emperor, the Lord of the Yellow Earth, knew how little it meant: ten years, fifty years, a hundred, a thousand; complained. Here in this land the pure, sweet overpowering spirit of the Most Splendid Completed One was stirring. It was not yet time for the kingdom of Sakyamuni to be fulfilled; first, so went the prophesy, the afflictions of the holy lamas must increase beyond bearing.

How the passive had to suffer, these bearers of the Wu-wei of

whom Ch'ien-lung complained, whose destruction was accompanied by weighty omens. Poor seekers. Buddha would find them a place among the reborn. Terrible contradiction: the Emperor suspected himself of being a nullity, and permitted the murder of those who suspected it still more deeply, who felt it more fervently.

Exuberance, beyond salvation, of births from every pond, multiplication of the world ten times, a thousand times in an instant.

If the world mountain Sumeru were not ringed around with seven seas and seven rocky girdles, lust in its wildness would burst all bounds and flood out into the void, seep into the false heaven of forms and formlessness.

How to call a halt, how not to take fright, lose one's breath and fall panting, brow to the ground, in fear and fainting.

The lamas lived like posts in a swamp, islands in a stormy sea, happy glimpses of light, enders of the cycle, dissolvers of the ring.

More help, more candles.

And they burned so weakly in the darkness, the little wandering candles, the Truly Powerless, lay brethren, the dead in that Mongolian town.

A soft rising plaint, the croaking of frogs, became perceptible. A smug phlegmatic choir puffed itself up in the water.

On one occasion the wonderful man allowed himself a visit to the ladies of the Imperial harem. He sat in the open palanquin under a parasol of yellow silk. He held his gaze lowered so as not to sully himself with the sight of the beautiful women. They thrilled under his blessing hands and kissed one another when he had left, joyful to have seen him.

The period of his stay in Peking drew to its close. It was observed how the traveller from the Mountains of Grace grew quieter and more reserved. A tiredness pressed upon him. He sighed a lot; he emerged from his contemplations with empty, sunken eyes. No one asked him, no one let it be remarked in any way that a change had been noticed in his condition. It would have gone against spiritual insight to mourn, for the living Buddha was at liberty to change his

corporeal dwelling. A human anxiety seized those around the dispenser of grace. Something seemed to oppress him. Something he said revealed the cause to the Changkya Hutuktu, to that bookworm who poked about him, catalogued him. The hot climate and the humidity characteristic of this land did not, perhaps, quite suit him; he longed for black felt tents and the snowy steppe. It was an isolated remark; the Panchen Rinpoche kept his feelings to himself.

He was not one of those pious men who are accompanied through life by lightness, gaiety. He sought little contact with children and harmless natures. The sight of a child's round eyes froze him. He made his bed among heavy souls. There he felt easy, the air seemed good to him; he let himself walk, let himself radiate. From childhood on he had known only the hardest and most fearful things, had seen himself besieged by victims of fate.

And now, fetched up in this vast, almost unprepared empire, there was a monstrous towering and tottering over him on all sides. Lands and peoples stretched endlessly away. He bent over in perplexity. In his perplexity he seemed to himself a peasant whose task was to till this land of the eighteen provinces, till it all by himself. An uncertain twitching, buzzing, dizziness from deep inside disturbed the skin of his head, filled his brain like a sponge. He felt a great weariness in the small of his back. His heart and lungs seemed to dangle in him like wood, clack together now and then.

For four days the doors and halls of the monastery of Huang-szu had remained closed. Paldan Ishe was ill. Many times he recalled fleetingly the monastery he had visited last, with the Sleeping Buddha. The statue had made a deep impression on his eyes. He smiled: his legs wouldn't let him up from that position. The doctors who attended him, Tibetans and Mongols, had not yet agreed on a diagnosis. Every five hours each was honoured to feel the sick man's pulse.

Until on the fifth day the fever broke, on the holy man's face little buds, tender pustules appeared, and with horror the monastery's college of doctors recognized the black pox.

At one stroke the light was torn from the throng of cardinals,

priests and the pious. Men with lofty titles, Magisters, Overbrimming Ones, Princes of the Law ran in confusion, grains of sand rolling, rolling. Through corridors smoky with incense the terrible rumour crept like a black cat hugging the walls furtively, across courtyards, then with a whiplash spring of the hind paws transformed itself into a winged bat, wider, emitting shrill whistles, flying as a lumpy, sulphur yellow cloud to the horizon, covering the sky.

Chia-ch'ing took his turn with the other Imperial princes watching over the sickbed in Huang-szu. The Emperor himself, already on the road, sent orders by runner for three hundred thousand taels to be distributed to the poor of the city. In Huang-szu, close by the lodge of the feverscalded man, Masses never ceased. The courtyards still resounded to festive drums, comets, white trumpets, little bells, gongs; the garish blue-white of holy vessels arranged in display drew the light and every eye. The monks erected a wall about the monastery of devotional pennants, prayer trees, fortune streamers. The swarms of humanity surging against the monastery threw up whole abutments of prayer-inscribed stones against the walls.

Within it was quiet. The Buddha struggled with the Pox Goddess. Bishops in pointed hats and dignitaries in brocades and coloured boots ran about dull and bleary under each other's feet. Fasting hollowed out their bodies.

Every three days in the little cupola hall of the temple the great, grim sacrificial feast of Sodchong was performed. As the trumpets of the Law sounded, the throng outside the monastery walls set itself in motion from east to west, lurched clumsily forward about the walls with a scraping of sand, clattering of wreaths, *om mani padme bum* swelling like thunder, while inside the cupola hall the monks tormented their knees, flattening the mats in long rows, yellow robe after yellow robe. Murmurs, tinkling of bells, recitations, handclapping, blaring instruments. In heavy spirits the Changkya lifted the little golden mirror from the altar, raised it aloft. The oldest Chanpo swung the beaked aspergillum, in his left hand held an embossed plate. And while the Changkya turned the mirror to

catch the shade of Buddha, the Chanpo poured. The congregation swooning. The sugarsweet water ran over the surface of the mirror, dripped into the plate. The soft singing wavered; the filled plate travelled from hand to hand. The priests smeared skull, forehead, breast, and wept.

Paldan Ishe was delirious. The sores crawled across his skin of bronze, flowed together. At first they were filled with a yellow fluid, then they began to darken, turn thick red, black.

Chia-ch'ing sat for hours at the window of the cell and watched the swollen unrecognizable face of this wisest of men, the face in which at times two quite unearthly eyes freed themselves from the constriction of encrusted lids and sent cool bright glances up to the blue ceiling, like the crystal fountains under the elms of K'unming-hu. The fat prince felt a pricking jealousy of the Tashilama, who had usurped his place in Ch'ien-lung's confidence. But he was defenceless against the foreigner when he observed these unleashed glances. Until his illness the prince, after the one visit, had avoided the Tibetan, considering him a dangerous parasite, king of the yellow priests. The sick man's affliction unbent the prince; he kept close by him, at last shivered at the thought that his father would lose this man. Chia-ch'ing made vows that Paldan Ishe might live.

The doctors rubbed the sick man's body with saffron. They tied his hands together, held his elbows, and seven times burned his left side and his right with dry stalks of moxa wood dipped in hemp oil. They scrawled red signs on the paper windows, walls, threshold. As the illness developed and sores broke out even in his mouth, the doctors acquiesced in admitting six Chosskyong, simple native sorcerers favoured by the Tashi-lama.

In feathered cloaks with birds' claws, shapeless headgear on which the fivefold death's head grinned, they hopped in threes around the halfconscious man, whispering, convinced that today they would perform their masterpiece. They summoned the fearsome Takma.

Circling the bed they threw a fine powder into the air.

They held iron rattles in their hands. Shaking them gently they bent over the patient: "The five and fifty that are gathered on the

forehead shall all disappear like blown leaves. The seven and seventy that are gathered on the throat shall all disappear like blown leaves. The nine and ninety that are gathered on the breast shall all disappear like blown leaves." They shuffled about a good while in their alarming way, stomped out one after the other, still screeching at the threshold to a curlicued painted symbol.

In fact the holy man grew easier over the next few days, could open his mouth more, swallow cold tea.

Then Ch'ien-lung arrived. At the window seat that Chia-ch'ing had occupied, the great Emperor waited and fought for the dying man's soul.

For Ch'ien-lung there were no more censors, no more Court of Astrologers. With a senile narrowing of his thoughts he held fast to the Panchen Rinpoche, whom he held responsible for the disturbances in the northern provinces and who held back the truth, the real truth. Yes, only Paldan Ishe could help.

His face immobile, the Yellow Lord sat behind the red-painted paper window, waited for the holy man to wake. Ch'ien-lung, hands folded in his lap, followed every movement in the room with dumb eyes. He was quite devoid of impatience. Paldan Ishe could not slip away from him.

The next day he came again and waited.

On the afternoon of the third day Paldan Ishe kept his brown eyes open for a long while, gazing from beneath the mask of black pock crusts recognized Ch'ien-lung and moved his lips. He also recognized the six bishops who stood in beggar rags along the walls, not leaving the room for an instant in order that they might attend at the onset of death.

Ch'ien-lung bent to the sick man's ear. "I am desolate that you should be suffering in my country, Your Holiness."

Paldan Ishe seemed to want to laugh. He shook his head and gurgled.

Unperturbed by the enormity of the event that was about to pass, the parting of the Buddha from his most recent body, the old Emperor spoke. He asked often if the sick man understood him. Firm

nods. With hard precision Ch'ien-lung related recent events, the disturbances, Mien's infamy. Paldan Ishe's eyes grew lively as Ch'ien-lung whispered. The holy man was in his element among heavy downcast souls. When Ch'ien-lung was finished he saw the brown globes of eyes move, but the sick man's lips twitched, formed no words.

The Emperor rose, sternly threw back his head.

The next afternoon he sat again at the holy man's bedside. The six bishops stood unmoving in their beggar rags along the walls, waited. The Emperor whispered more urgently, repeated his account, grasped the sick man's knuckles, desired new advice, promised to erect new monasteries for the yellow church in every province.

The sick man strove for words, smiled. Only his look spoke, was silent. Anger twisted the Emperor's face.

When the Emperor came next afternoon he found the holy man sitting up in bed. Only four bishops stood along the walls, barefoot, browncowled. Two were supporting the holy man, who kept his eyes closed, unable to open them again beneath the cushionlike swelling of cheeks, lids, forehead. The two shavenheads were supporting him because he had shown by signs that he wanted to walk. A heavy fug of incense shrouded the room. The Yellow Lord stood transfixed in the smoke. No glance met his. The holy man was turned with his face to the west. Ch'ien-lung's palanquin went hastily back.

On a seesaw of delirium, turbidity, bright confusion Paldan Ishe woke and dreamed. Fleshtrussing cramps, hollow swaying over chasms, a clear feathery brightness alternated. The great weariness evaporated. The white walls of the labrang rose up, roofs gleamed in dull gold. The dead Dalai Lama appeared and walked quickly past under his umbrella. Master the images, meditate, meditate! Short rest in white halls. People, so many people, on camels, in carts; plunging, sinking people. Courtyard gates, sedan chairs, gongs. Help across the sea, great boats, small boats. Gigantic, incorporeal he dragged his luminous body leaving a phosphorescent wake, he was a pillar high as Heaven, revolving. No trembling beset him. He

couldn't tell if it was his feelings that he felt, if they were the feelings of others, many, countless others. Poised. Poised mysteriously between six mysterious syllables.

For three days and two nights the six bishops supported the holy man, who must die a Buddha. In pairs they propped up his back that grew ever rounder. One clasped the head and held it high. One pressed the peeling hands against the breast and several times pushed jutting elbows into the sides. One crossed the dying man's legs. The sixth turned up the soles of his feet, which flamed red.

On the morning of the third day Amitabha left the body of Lobsang Paldan Ishe. The corpse stiffened in the position of a praying Buddha.

Weeks passed before Ishe's body set off on the return journey to Tibet, months before it arrived in Tashilunpo, town of tears. The spirit of Buddha had already wandered long over beloved fields of snow, grassy steppe, stroked shaggy yaks, wandered here and there, sought the child in whom he would make his new home.

The people in the monastery Huang-szu in Peking embraced the snuffed out body of Lobsang Paldan Ishe, son of a civil official in Tibet. They embalmed it.

On the afternoon following the death the Imperial gong reverberated outside the monastery. In white mourning clothes the Emperor stood beltless, ringless, bareheaded before the bier, on its purple velvet a terrible Buddha crosslegged in yellow pontifical splendour, enthroned in dreadful peace.

Black gangrenous scabs hung down in shreds from a bloated face. Bloody slime dropped minute by minute from the mouth. Thick round protuberances in place of lips traversed the lower half of the face. Eyelids closed; but in some strange way they had lost their swelling so that next to the lumpish nose two greenly shimmering hollows sank into the skull. On the head drooped the mitre with five bejewelled Buddha-images. Gobs of slime trickled over the embroidered gold brocade on the breast and behind the neatly placed sleeves.

Right and left of the enthroned Buddha offerings for the dead

stood on little tables: low pyramids of rice and pottery. Incense sticks burned. The bishops, the Changkya, stopped their mouths on the floorboards.

Ch'ien-lung stood rigid for many minutes. His glance swept to the window seat on which he had waited for the holy man's awakening, to the east wall, where the timbers of the deathbed were stacked. In cold resignation he examined the features of the ascended lama. He felt no horror, followed the slow progress of a blood blister on the corpse's lower lip and the discharge of the loathsome fluid.

It was right that this man should have been marked out. His body was rotten with pusfilled sores. He was no better than the chanting priests. His fate showed it clearly. Here the Mongolian town, there the pox: balanced in one pair of scales. The departed priest king had been unable to advise, for all his piles of books, Kandjur and Tandjur.

And now Ch'ien-lung grew uncertain. His frostiness dissolved. He fell on his knees before the enthroned corpse and wept, but none in the room knew that he wept in rage at the lama, in furious recrimination because the glorious sage had deceived him. Ch'ien-lung had allowed himself to be drawn, dazzled, onto the ice of this deceiver. And the Overbrimming-with-Grace had slipped free before he could be pinned down. He'd known how to spit blood, the corpse, cast looks of consolation, but the scornful priest couldn't bring himself to a single syllable.

Ch'ien-lung ordered a sarcophagus of gold made in the form of a reliquary pyramid. Into it they lowered the body of Paldan Ishe. The hollows and the body were sprinkled with white salt.

The hundred days of Masses for his soul followed, in which the northern provinces, all of Mongolia took part. A whole people broke down in grief for the departed Buddha. And still the body had not reached Tibet.

The endless mourning train set itself in motion, not to the north but to the west. It dragged its way through the western provinces; people closed around the golden stupa and held it fast as if it were a pagoda sent to protect the district. The heavy shrine containing the

corpse did not touch ground day or night; it slid from shoulder to shoulder. Taken up at Huang-szu amid the braying of huge trumpets it was laid down seven months and eight days later in Tashilunpo, in the white labrang that rocked with lamentations. Near Huang-szu in that same year the marble obelisk was erected which Ch'ien-lung dedicated to the holy man's memory: capped by his golden mitre, to one side the altar for offerings, fringed with long silk pennants.

Two days after Paldan Ishe's death the favourites of Ch'ien-lung sat in the little reception hall before the Son of Heaven's dais. He himself gazed often through the wide open windows. Below him A-kuei squatted next to Chao Hui, Song; Chia-ch'ing too, whose courtesy visit had been granted by the Emperor, who was summoned to the audience without the boon of a private interview.

The twelve men were grouped at little tables, lacquered square tables around which black wooden stools were set, topped with yellow and red cushions. A larger, round table in the centre of the lower hall was laden with plates of fruit, melons, salads, salted duck eggs. Small bowls containing innumerable soups crowded the tables, swallows' nests, shark's fin with mushrooms, sea slugs, nenuphar root, bamboo shoots; roast duck with walnuts, chunks of roast pork. They concluded with sweetmeats, almonds, melon seeds. Servants flitted about with cups and winejugs. General bowing, raising of cups, taking seats all at once, murmuring.

Stringed instruments struck up. The use of fans was urged. Against the long wall of the hall opposite the Emperor's dais a small stage opened. Dancers mounted the stage to nasal tones, the clack of wooden clappers. These bodies, so delicate and slender, belonged to eunuchs. Reserved mute glances from soft eyes; cheeks, mouths, eyebrows formed with the aid of paints; wigs and tinkling swaying silver pendants in black hair; black silk tunics in swelling folds, loose yellow trousers, small nimble feet in high green pumps of satin. Only now and then was one of the guests favoured with a glance. Dancing in pairs they placed peacock feathers on the stage,

whirled quick as a flash through them, gracefully pulled each other close, sprang high over a feather and froze on tiptoe as they sprang, revolved slowly on their toes as crooked arms combatted above, sought and twined.

They danced in silence, a shadowplay. Ch'ien-lung kept glancing at Chia-ch'ing, who as usual sat alone in a reverie.

A tender female voice sang to viol and lute behind the stage. As the old song said: in muffled tones veiled by sadness, the bass strings roaring like a flood, the treble strings whispering, and as the notes came livelier they were like a rain of pearls onto a marble dish. The plaintive voice sang Tu Fu's song: *I am moved by deep sadness and lay myself down in the thick grass. I begin, my pain finds voice. Streaming with tears, streaming with tears. Oh, who could for long tramp the path of life, that all must travel alone?* And as the old poem said: the song ended like a broken jar from which water gushes; and at the end a bow was drawn across the strings, which vibrated under a single touch as if cloth were being torn.

Ch'ien-lung nodded. The pockmarked enthroned Buddha from Tibet stood before his eyes; shreds of gangrenous black skin hung from his bloated cheeks, the once smooth straight forehead bulged like a hydrocephalic child's. Arrived in Jehol a living Buddha from Tashilunpo; departed an ulcerous lump of flesh.

Viol, lute and women's voices, at the Yellow Lord's wish, sang thrice more Tu Fu's song of transience. Then Ch'ien-lung rose. A eunuch stood at Chia-ch'ing's side and whispered in his ear. Dance, song, feasting were interrupted by a solemn ninefold touching of the floor. As gaiety heightened in the hall, wild ribbon dances swirling as music goaded, acrobats in green and red sacks springing up, weaving curiously in and out, burrowing into each other, the Yellow Lord paced rapidly at Chia-ch'ing's side beneath the unapproachable blackness of the cypresses whose dark flames soared, pillar after pillar, into the pink evening sky.

Ch'ien-lung wanted his son, whose chocolate brown overgown threw out flame-red folds in the speed of their pace, to account for himself in this matter; he knew which one.

Chia-ch'ing sighed, did not answer right away; suppressed his irritation and impatience, referred quietly to his letter in which he had reported Mien-k'o's high treason to Jehol.

Ch'ien-lung was not satisfied; he wanted an oral account. The word "pardon" slipped from him and gave Chia-ch'ing a hint.

The Emperor wanted peace. Chia-ch'ing was astonished. There was something distressing in the notion that Ch'ien-lung could feel himself so weak.

Chia-ch'ing overdid his expressions of courtesy and devotion, declared himself absolutely innocent, with not a trace of bitterness in his tone.

The Emperor broke out in wild reproaches: they were a fine set, here in the Forbidden City; children after their father's life; all filial piety gone; he couldn't assure Chia-ch'ing strongly enough how sick he was of being a father to sons who hardly knew even the words 'social order'. Age was creeping up on him; they'd observed aright. The behaviour of his children disgusted him; he was ashamed of his children.

Without rising to the accusations Chia-ch'ing sighed: he had hoped that the late Paldan Ishe would have succeeded in dispelling his father's unease. Had the great Jewel of Learning not provided illumination in Jehol, not lighted the way?

"Lighted the way! Chia-ch'ing, we are not little boys. Just see how this jewel shone on me before it went out: ha, didn't it deceive me, this Jewel of Learning, before it went out? The prefects send me despatch after despatch about rebellion. I rejoice in the flames. And that was Paldan Ishe, Panchen Rinpoche, the Ocean of Wisdom, treasure of the Mountain of Grace. It really didn't call for so much wisdom."

Chia-ch'ing whispered, probing cautiously: "The foreigner doesn't know the earth spirits of our land. He speaks and deliberates with wisdom. Men of the east can hardly be calmed with Tibetan wisdom."

Ch'ien-lung darted a strange look at his son; his face grew black as he turned again to the cypresses. He walked beside Chia-ch'ing like a

stranger, after suffering so at his absence. To Chia-ch'ing's horror, he sat down on the bench under the thuya tree at the foot of which the ghost doll of Mien-k'o and the woman P'ei had been buried. The Emperor sank heavily onto the little wooden bench, jutted his chin, looked at the ground that he brushed with his fan, spoke on, not releasing Chia-ch'ing from his gaze.

"You're to be my successor, Chia-ch'ing. I've given up hope of finding a better. I can hope no more: all of you have turned it to gall. Here, see this little key that fits my writing desk. When Heaven calls me, you shall open my desk and find a document in the book *Li Ch'ing* naming you heir to the throne."

He still gazed fixedly at Chia-ch'ing's plump composed face. Chia-ch'ing stared sadly before him; his loose left eyelid twitched. "I don't want to be your heir, Majesty. I can't see any difference in the way you sent Pu-wang off to the Ili and send me to the throne of the Ta Ch'ing. You accuse me. I don't deserve it."

Both were silent. Refined singing from the guest hall wafted across. *Oh, who could for long tramp the path of life, that all must travel alone?*

The Emperor seemed to have forgotten the conversation. Chia-ch'ing was profoundly astonished at the extraordinary changes in his father's expression: the strongest tension and complete exhaustion chased each other across it. Only now did Chia-ch'ing notice that Ch'ien-lung had brought back from Jehol hollowed temples, a mouth whose movement and lines had lost their sharpness. At first the Emperor had seemed still in command of his old impulsiveness, but from his eyes something helpless, woeful, anxious often escaped that was new in Ch'ien-lung. Chia-ch'ing was especially shocked by an occasional lowering, hunted expression that regularly preceded a look of apathy. This expression so unmanned the prince that with an obscure feeling of calamity he could barely restrain himself from leaving the spot.

He said, when he noticed his father straining constantly after the distant singing, "My father spent many days listening to wise sayings from the west. You were going to speak of them."

“Of Paldan Ishe?”

“Yes.”

“Or of this bench? This pleases me more than Paldan Ishe. Do you know this bench? One night at the new moon they came creeping, three, four, one behind the other: the half blind woman P’ei, fat Mien-k’o, Pu-wang; a child with the heart of a criminal, Mrs Ying, whom I do not know. I was the fifth, Chia-ch’ing. Though I sat in Jehol or in the monastery of Kolotu’r and slept, this Mrs P’ei had me in her power as I slept. It is possible, no doubt of that; I recognize it in my ailments, when I lose myself for whole weeks and find myself again. She managed to squeeze me into the little jade doll, spirit me away with a movement of her hand like this, or this, or this; and then they carried me a living corpse here by this bench, down here into the earth. So the vampire, confined, half suffocating, could tear at me, at what the woman had left of me. Pu-wang, my son, stood there, and my son Mien-k’o; their eyes glittering with hungry joy, little Pu-wang, the swine Mien. I can well imagine that night. Where were you that night, Chia-ch’ing?”

“At the jade fountain on Wanshou-shan.”

“You were at Wanshou-shan. That’s how you attend to my interests, when I have need of you. If the dead weren’t with us we’d be quite forsaken. You are my only friend; I still place my hopes in you. The shades are my only friends.”

“I fear the Tibetan’s visit has overtaxed Your Majesty. You seem so exhausted; your arms are trembling.”

“That was the woman P’ei and Mien-k’o and Pu-wang, the whole tribe. They managed that much. They made me half mad, so that I begged Paldan Ishe for advice and counted myself lucky to receive it, I here on this bench, with trembling arms, the son of Yung-cheng, grandson of K’ang-hsi. That’s the solution of this east-westerly riddle. No, Panchen Rinpoche, your wooden sceptre doesn’t make me shudder. Your black scabs, your peeling flesh are much more interesting to me. Unmasked.—Am I trembling much, Chia-ch’ing?”

“It comes from the lateness of the hour. If we go back to the guests in the hall, my father will feel better. Or if we walk across to the

orchids. My orchids gave you pleasure once. Won't you stand up? It would give me the greatest happiness to enjoy your confidence. I have neglected nothing, and shall neglect nothing, in my devotion to you. Won't you stand up?"

"No, stay here a while."

"Are you looking for something down there? Have you dropped something?"

Ch'ien-lung had bent forward and was grubbing with his jewelled fan in the earth.

"No, nothing. I haven't dropped anything. I just want to show you I'm not afraid. I can stand up to this Madam P'ei and wicked Mien. It's not the dark I'm afraid of. You should have seen me last night. When I walked past the guard out through the door. Through the garden. No one saw me. It doesn't need four people just to carry one doll. You can carry it wrapped in linen in your arms like a child. It's a little heavier, a little colder. I often carried Pu-wang like that myself; I'm very fond of children. A doll like that doesn't cry. See here, Chia-ch'ing, I've found the place."

He dug with an effort into the soil; some ribs of his white fan split and hung loose. He seemed to have found what he was looking for; he thrust in his hand, felt about. The soil loosened. He pulled out a white cloth by one end; something black came with it. Suddenly it rolled free of the cloth. Chia-ch'ing sprang up together with the Emperor, who snatched the doll up from the earth and showed it triumphantly to his cringing son.

"Am I afraid, Chia-ch'ing, or am I not afraid? Don't be upset; this is me. I've no desire to bewitch anyone. I'm not capable of bewitching any of you, whatever your names are. I'll soon be done with you. How prettily they dressed me up. Madam P'ei must be an excellent seamstress to copy so exactly my undershirt, my gown, girdle, fan, and look, my ring. If I were a demon and didn't know who Ch'ien-lung was, I too would be fooled by this thing. So finely made, so exquisite. Brother, little brother, so pretty, so alive! Won't you give me your ring? Let us greet each other, old lateborn brother of jade."

Chia-ch'ing groaned and shuddered. He was afraid to touch the figure in the linen cloth, yet had to wrest it from Ch'ien-lung.

"Father, what are you doing! Give me the figure. It's not right to play with the figure. Do it for my sake, father. They'll see us from the hall."

Dulcet tones of stringed instruments wafted through the cypresses. The Yellow Lord, his face wrinkled with pleasure, gazed all the while at the doll, pressed it to him. "Tu Fu was wrong, Chia-ch'ing. In the end Tu Fu was wrong. That pleases me. Who could for long tramp the road of life, that each must travel alone. I can, for I've found a companion, a companion of stone. I scarcely know if it is he who stands here, I who lie there. Both of us for sure belong together, Chia-ch'ing, the doll and I. And so find the road of life bearable. Sacrifice for us, Chia-ch'ing, my dear son, honour us both. And take us back to my rooms, to our rooms."

Chia-ch'ing managed to wrest the dooll from the Emperor's arms, drop it into the hole.

The Emperor made a solemn face, taut with expectancy. He looked straight across to the marble columnss of his palace, a rapt hearkening, a grateful inclination of the ear to barely audible sounds.

He repeated, whispering, "Take us back, dear Chia-ch'ing, to our rooms. We shan't forget your friendship."

They exchanged no more words. They set off in the direction of the Emperor's quarters, across the marble bridge. But Ch'ien-lung suddenly veered aside towards the murmuring guest halls. Then he turned back, and followed Chia-ch'ing.

The Emperor's steps dragged ever slower the nearer he came to his palace, where white and yellow lanterns gleamed. He ignored the parting words and bows of distraught Chia-ch'ing. At the threshold Ch'ien-lung ducked down, as if he were passing under something.

That night, once more a night of the new moon, Chia-ch'ing slept badly. His dreams were so fevered that by the third night watch he

could no longer bear to remain on the hot brickbed, but rolled off and in a daze of sleepiness dressed in the pitch dark room. Not until he was fully clothed and searching for his cap on the table did he come to himself, conscious of his tongue glued to the roof of his mouth, stand there wondering why he had got dressed in the middle of the night.

He sat there a while in the darkness, paced up and down once or twice between the vases that stood on the floor, in sudden disquiet left the room and stood in the front courtyard.

From the watchman's box, the outline of it barely discernible, came a gurgling and snoring. A damp cold night breeze swept now and then through the broad parklands of the Vermilion City, which lay in a darkness more fearsome than Chia-ch'ing had ever seen.

His heart pounded; in his ears was a thin roaring. He did not know why he stood here or why he was looking up at the treetops.

He slowly turned to go back to his room, but after a few paces realized he had another plan and wanted rather to go out into the park, beneath the trees, and unburden himself of his disquiet.

He trudged slowly through the gate along a path. Gravel crunched under his soft soles. He moved aside onto grass so as not to make a noise, for his steps frightened him. It frightened him that someone should be here in the dark with no companion, and he wondered why it was that this someone had not brought a companion.

Chia-ch'ing's disquiet grew with every step, every turning in the path. He had no idea why he had chosen to come this way. Whenever he saw a little pavilion between the trees he thought this must be the place—he wasn't sure what place; but he wasn't there yet. In his great anxiety he Sighed and rubbed his cheeks with both hands.

The paths emerged from the trees. He felt his way around enormous fountains like black fingers. Then suddenly he stood rapt, hands drawn up to his throat like a swimmer, screwed up eyes.

A dark apparition came swiftly down the path; he could make it out only from the movement. It meant to slip past; it was gone. He ran behind it, reached it in four strides, held it fast.

It was a woman with unbound hair, who thrust at him with her head to push him away.

She whispered, “What have I done to you?”

He slapped her face, struggled with her to the foot of a cypress. Now Chia-ch’ing realized he was right next to the Emperor’s apartment.

He snarled at her, “Demon! Where’ve you been? What have you done? Tell me your name!”

She bit his finger, looked malevolently up at him. He threw the apparition against a tree root. It made no sound, held fast to his legs.

He could not subdue her, and when he saw her spiteful grin such a shiver ran down his spine that in a panic he trampled his legs free from her hands. The woman flung herself to one side snarling. Chia-ch’ing grabbed a dangling girdle-end. She struggled to free herself, but in a trice he had her on her feet, hands bound in a noose, and with great strides, the woman whimpering behind him, ran to the Emperor’s apartment that lay concealed in the profound darkness, tied her twisting and spitting hand and foot to a stone hitching post for elephants, stood trembling by the door.

He pushed over the threshold. He remembered how curiously the Emperor, that little slender figure, had ducked his head under the tall doorarch. He too had better duck his head.

Ch’ien-lung had not gone to bed that evening. After perusing documents in his study, entering corrections to his great poem on the city of Mukden, he ate little for his supper. But the chamberlain remarked how much wine the Emperor drank, how at the end of the meal he sat silent at the table, ordered no music, no game of morra with his favourites.

Tightlipped, as if he did not see them, he brushed past the most graceful beauties of his harem standing in their purple gowns at the door of the dining room, summoned by Hu to enliven the Emperor’s mood. He passed the prostrate rows of eunuchs and serving girls with steps now fast, now hesitating. Once he raised his hand to the servant who followed with a lamp, uttered, “A-kuei,” pondered,

waved him away.

In his room he tried to read by the light of an oil lamp. It was a little work that Paldan Ishe had presented to him, a Tibetan text translated into Manchu, entitled *The Prayer of Deliverance from the Abyss of the Intermediate State*.

He stretched out on his mattress bed after dismissing the servants, dozed off for a while with the woodframed pages, waking gazed about the tall wide room with its scent of sandalwood. His beard was crushed and matted, one cheek glowed red, his hands and feet were frozen. He sniffed. Hot bitterness stuck in his throat.

No sound outside; it must be late. Ch'ien-lung felt his way to the edge of the uncurtained bed. His girdle was too tight; he loosed the knot and let it drop together with the broken fan and clinking ornaments onto the vermilion carpet, in which golden orchids sparkled like stars, stamped its surface with milky discs.

He noticed that he was groaning loudly, that he must be ill again, but he noticed this only for brief moments. Then the doddering man busied himself among cabinets, mirrors and vases, sought in corners, felt with his fingers on the carpet, scratched with his thumbnail at the woven flowers, kneeling hollowed his hand and tried to scoop or scrape up the shimmering stars so he could rub them on his tongue.

A little bronze cow grazed in a corner. Ch'ien-lung, stooping, laid his right arm, sleeve pulled up, onto the cold metal back, moved one leg and bobbed as if he were going to mount the beast.

He picked up the Tibetan book. Sitting on the bed he turned the pages over and over and pressed them whimpering to his breast so that the edges splintered and snapped the chain around his neck. Moaning louder he buried the paper in his face, sobbed, "Paldan Ishe, Paldan Ishe," and with his head hidden in his left arm sent the fingers of his right hand groping blindly for the pearls that were dropping one by one from the chain, rolling across his lap.

The old man slid to the floor after them. When he had gathered a handful he put them where his girdle lay, so that they rolled gently apart.

Abstractedly he got to his feet, stumbled over the carpet,

murmured, “Pray, Paldan Ishe, pray. They’re stealing me from here. Pray, Paldan Ishe.”

He crept against the wall at the foot of his white bed. The wall was recessed like a cupboard: a little altar with an ancestral tablet filled the space. Ch’ien-lung shifted from side to side in front of the altar. His grizzling and groaning, in a descending scale, were like the monotonous dirge of a flogged man. The Emperor, dulleyed, tears trickling, turned towards his bed, tugged down a purple coverlet, retreated to the recess in the wall. Tangled in the cloth he stumbled, and twice stood still when pearls cracked under his feet. Then he raised the purple shroud and hung it with fumbling hands over the altar, secured it around the silver tablet.

He sighed and dropped onto one knee, stayed thus with his head sunk on his breast, frowned now and then and raised his eyes. His lips moved a good deal.

Just after the drums had beat the second night watch, the door moved. Ch’ien-lung watched it tensely, without lifting his head. He had thought the door locked. But it must be open, for it was visibly moving. And the loose silk panels of the tall screen near the door were fluttering. Two pearls close by his foot rolled farther off, a large pearl rolled away from the screen. When something clattered behind his back, the Emperor turned.

A slender woman in a smoky blue gown was letting herself down from an unlit hanging lamp and her feet could not quite touch the floor. A draught came from the ceiling. The woman had climbed in through the roof.

This wildhaired ghost swept towards Ch’ien-lung as he stood up, and cried to him as it assailed his breast, “Why are you out of bed? Why can’t you help me?”

The Emperor shrank away in fear, apologized; he didn’t know her.

She flung back her gown. There at her girdle hung a skein of slender cord. “Run away,” she cried. “You don’t know me? Then who are you waiting for here? My gown’s torn.”

She scurried to the recess, eyes darting about the room. “I’ve lost my comb.” She tugged the purple shroud from the altar. The old man

hurried imploring behind her.

A thin clinking came from the ancestral tablet. Whimpering, Ch'ien-lung tried to seize her by the hands. With a mocking laugh and clicking her tongue the ghost threw a cord over one of the bronze chains of the hanging lamp, dragged the purple coverlet behinnd her so that Ch'ien-lung caught his foot on it and fell heavily to the floor; disappeared through the halfopen door.

The Emperor pulled himself painfully upright, limped coughing, spitting, clutching his chest to the hanging lamp, climbed onto a stool, tottering wound the cord about his neck and hunching his shoulders, legs flailing, kicked the stool aside.

When Chia-ch'ing entered the dimly lit room, the Emperor was hanging from the lamp, feet scraping the carpet. The door was open, a purple bedcover lay on the floor of the corridor outside the room, one corner across the threshold. The noose was not drawn tight. The body was sinking under its own weight, the swollen face with its gaping foamy mouth, popping eyes, was warm to the touch. Before Chia-ch'ing could find scissors in the chaotic, overheated room, the body plumped face down onto the carpet.

Sweat itched behind Chia-ch'ing's ears, down his neck. He loosened the cord from under Ch'ien-lung's chin, turned the body onto its back, kneaded the bare chest, poured water from a font over its forehead. A thin layer of vapour clouded the mirror he held at the Emperor's mouth. A creaking and rattling rose from deep in Ch'ien-lung's lungs. The retracted eyelids flickered, the bulging eyes sank back and took on a blank glaze. His heart, which had not stopped beating, set up a fast deadly tempo without strength.

As Chia-ch'ing with tearfilled stupid eyes sank exhausted onto the carpet and the grey of dawn replaced the red glimmer from the oil flame, the Yellow Lord propped himself up on both elbows, wheezed, coughed, stammered.

He stood up, reeled to the window, there held and rubbed his cordwealed throat, knelt on the bed, gazing all the while uncertainly with bloodshot eyes at prostrate Chia-ch'ing. His breath laboured more harshly.

He wanted to see this fellow closer to, the fellow sleeping so soundly there on his carpet, ha, who'd got himself caught, the lamelegged fox. He was well and truly caught; not even the watchmen had noticed anything.

Stiffly, carefully he crept up to Chia-ch'ing, vainly trying to hold breath that whistled and sawed. Then a darkness dizzied his back, between his shoulderblades, into his skull. He keeled over onto his hands.

Crawled on all fours, with a hellish delight crushed something that crunched under his left thumb, lifted his hand. He held it close to his eye, licked clear the fragment of pearl, spat it out. Head lolling he remained for a while bent over the fragment. A great pearl glinted just in front of him on the carpet. Ch'ien-lung's face grew long, he opened his mouth wide. His hollowed hand crept gently towards the pearl as if he were catching flies, heaved himself forward, gaped speechless now at plump Chia-ch'ing, now at the hand beneath him. Then he felt doubtfully with his left hand for the broken empty pearlstring. And feet wide apart, balancing with outstretched arms he staggered upright towards Chia-ch'ing, pearl in one hand, chest boiling, grabbed a splintered page from a little table as he passed, stumbling lunged with curses, dull cries at Chia-ch'ing. Chia-ch'ing leapt up, screamed; they struggled.

The Yellow Lord rasped hoarsely, "He's broken my pearlstring, the rogue, the murderer, the fat thief."

He scrabbled desperately as Chia-ch'ing brought him down. "He's trampled everything. My lovely pearls. Guard! Guard! You will bring me my chain of pearls. Murder!"

There were sounds from the corridor; lights glimmered through the half open door. Clink of weapons. The door burst open. A whirling eunuch dragged them apart, prised fingers loose, pushed Chia-ch'ing back and punched him in the jaw. Recoiling at the sight of the throttled eyes he recognized Chia-ch'ing. Attending the reeling Ch'ien-lung, two guards. The prince, groaning, explained in breathless syllables.

The Emperor roared on the carpet, arms grasping towards Chia-

ch'ing, sobbed, wailed, showed his broken pearlstring. "Murderer! You will bring me my chain of pearls. Hold him fast!"

The prince gulped cool air.

He found a cord tied around the stone post, of the same kind as the cord that Ch'ien-lung had had around his neck. A dry twiggy branch was tangled in the coils. The demon had already transformed itself.

The sickly condition into which Ch'ien-lung had fallen lasted two weeks. During this time the Emperor's moustaches turned completely white; his face like a mummy's.

As he recovered, Chia-ch'ing sat by him. The Emperor had no memory of that night.

Snow danced over the Forbidden City; the Emperor retrieved the reins of government. Then unexpectedly, in one of the huge conservatories, he brought up with his son the affair of the sects.

Chia-ch'ing, fully briefed on the previous summer's events, swelled with imprecations against the sectarians who disturbed and impoverished the country.

Ch'ien-lung, with the apathy of a ruined man, announced that the ancestors had spoken ill of him, that the lama pope hadn't been able to advise him and how difficult the whole affair was.

Then the prince implored his father, as he led him away from the hot stove, to recollect the means by which the empire had extended its frontiers during his reign—by mildness or by military force; that Confucius and other sages had commended patience, but not against rebels. Indeed, any ruler was guilty of a crime against his subjects, who didn't strike down rebellion of whatever kind with rod and sword.

Ch'ien-lung stood with his emaciated face against a fan palm and peeled off a long strip of bark. And about what exactly, Chia-ch'ing asked, were the ancestors supposed to be annoyed and had given a sign?

About weakness in taking the offensive, about negligence by appointed authorities; the events had been a warning; a portent that he should think of the Eighteen Provinces, and their fate that drew

inexorably nearer when innovators, enthusiasts, frauds and the half mad were allowed free rein to draw the ignorant astray. And with flashing eyes Chia-ch'ing spoke urgently to the Yellow Lord, whose absent gaze often passed across his son's plump, animated features. The entire West would fall on the Floreate Empire. Instead of Tibet being a tributary of the East, the Eighteen Provinces would be in thrall to the phantasms of visionary, uncouth priests. The lamas used subtle weapons. And how long would it be before the longnosed white men from India appeared on the scene, and the redbearded barbarians from the northern frontier with their knouts. The lustrous age-old world order of the Sage of Shantung would be lost under the wanton fantasies of western barbarians. Confucius must be defended. The sword must be unsheathed in time.

Up and down between the palms and cacti they dragged their bodies, breathing heavily. A silver pheasant strutted before them on the dewed marble slabs; it placed its red feet with sudden condescending decision; primly it arched its blueblack neck to display the brilliance of its feathers. In front of the bushy round trunk of an oil tree Ch'ien-lung parted from his son. His sunken eyes, framed in wrinkles, gazed unhappily out. He asked Chia-ch'ing, laying a hand on his shoulder, to be present at the coming secret consultations.

In the conferences that ensued with Chia-ch'ing, A-kuei, Song, Chao Hui, the old Emperor twisted and turned like one tired of life whom all want to save. He was loth to accept Chia-ch'ing's blindingly obvious proposal. He had buried himself deep in hopeless perplexity, and a secret, self-tormenting pleasure kept him there. How difficult it was to decide on hope. To this was added the obscure shame of a rescued suicide faced with life.

No amount of reasoning by his counsellors could have achieved what Chia-ch'ing's subtle tact succeeded in doing. The prince kept silent about earlier events, concealed all his flabbiness, wooed the Emperor whom he adored for this inner conflict.

When Ch'ien-lung, half inclined to accede, secretly delighted with his son, grew dubious, Chia-ch'ing selected a more forceful tack. He appeared bewildered by his father's opposition, ended one visit to the agitated Emperor with irritable words, unsure gestures, kept to his room.

To the Emperor, who soon came to seek him out, he declared himself inconsolable, since clearly it was true that their glorious dynasty had been abandoned by the ancestors. The Yellow Lord, incredulous, rigid, shattered by a cudgel blow, tried with anxious wails to save a remnant of hope, stuttered out the same arguments that Chia-ch'ing had brought against him. The plump prince snivelled, tearfully pawed the premisses over and over, sniffed them thoroughly, his every breath, every blink watched by the Emperor. They pushed each other back and forth, groaning, Ch'ien-lung every moment fearing his death sentence, each undermining the other, goading the other, wresting a decision from him. The Emperor summoned all his bruised desperation. He had to overcome his son's dull, obstinate blubbing. Until Chia-ch'ing yielded and flounced aside in annoyance.

The game was won. The Emperor felt chained to Chia-ch'ing in an enigmatic relationship. Ch'ien-lung sulked for days. No one could approach him with any matter of politics.

Then he took the bait. With a sulphurous anger, as if it came from himself, he flung at his Council of State his wish for the rebellion to be suppressed by force.

Three weeks passed after that night. Through the wintry landscape couriers bore the Imperial edict, the formulation of which had involved the entire Ministry and consultation with the elder princes and all the censors.

The proclamation announced the application, in a harsh, precisely specified rigour, of the law against heresy to the sectarians of the northern provinces. All resistance was to be treated as rebellion. In the decree the Emperor complained of the bad soil onto which his previous mercy had fallen. Military measures for suppressing the rebellion, which were to be set in train at once, would be under the

command of Chao Hui, whom the Emperor had vested with special authority and the supreme command of the various provincial armies.

Let the populace not be alarmed.

The Dragon Throne would defend the teachings of Confucius and of Heaven.

Book Four

The Western Paradise

The promulgation of the Imperial decree that winter met with little resistance. A few prefectures in the east and south of Chihli suppressed the orders. For the rest, the decree swept like a call to arms across the northern provinces.

Chao Hui's troops, the terrible murderers of Ili, marched into the northern province. A few hundred itinerant brothers and sisters, chanced on in small bands, were seized, condemned after interrogation. Little groups that resisted arrest were swiftly surrounded, overpowered, after a flogging cut into pieces. These actions were completed in no more than a few weeks, then Chao Hui yawned in the freezing northern province, could neither report victory to Peking nor launch an attack. The Truly Powerless had vanished from the face of the visible earth. Captured couriers, letters revealed that members of the secret society had withdrawn into towns and villages, the people had taken them in and all at once enormous masses were smouldering behind the Truly Powerless. The White Waterlily emerged like the ghost of a brutish impenetrable wall of humanity. Neither Chao Hui nor the Tsungtus of Chihli and Shantung cared to enquire where this dread freemasonry stood in relation to the Wu-wei people. A harsh winter set in.

It was after the last clash of a sectarian band with the soldiers that five traders from the village near where the clash had occurred moved out and travelled south with their sailcarts. These were diehard brothers, who meant to fetch Wang Lun back. Their one-wheeled carts, piled high, rolled before them in frosty snorts of

wind, slid over frozen snow as if on runners. Only two of them knew the dialect of the southern provinces they were heading for, but the other three were sturdy fellows, no strangers to fistwork and the open road. One of them, T'ang, when Ngo gave the order for them to disappear, had fled to the villages with a number of others, tried to stir up rebellion against the Manchus; he wearied of the business. He took his escape from the last skirmish with the Imperials as an omen, quickly persuaded his companions to come south with him to Wang Lun. He had Wang's whereabouts from Ngo. After a day's journey they turned about. T'ang needed credentials to show Wang Lun. When they reached the village again old Chu was nowhere to be found, old Chu who—as he often said—had been present in the Nank'ou mountains at the birth of the sect. During the plundering of the village he had brought suspicion on himself, and now the old fanatic, his heart burst with fury under intensive questioning, lay beside a broken mulberry tree in soft snow holding his stiff-frozen head between his feet. They waited out the night, then buried the corpse behind the magistracy wall to bring bad luck on the treacherous authorities, heaved the sticky head into a bucket of salt that T'ang carried on the handle of his cart, and now had the credentials they needed.

Many myths evolved later around this journey of five simple brothers to the Lower Reaches where Wang Lun dwelt. What is true is that in all the towns and villages they passed through people whispered behind them; the queue strings, lamps, wicks, feather flowers, silk cloths, tobacco pouches they sold were thrown away after a day or two for fear they were bewitched. Those who had bought sweetmeats from them claimed to feel a tingling in their fingertips, numbness of the tongue, tried their best to vomit. The peddlars came and went so swiftly people were alarmed; the amazingly low prices of their wares aroused belated suspicions that were strengthened by the grim, brooding expression on the face of T'ang, mourning old Chu's death, and also by the curious unease of the five travellers. It is said to have been quite otherwise three months later, when T'ang passed through the same places with

Wang Lun: happy and calm beside the calm, happy Wang Lun, both wrapped in the glorious spring weather in the cloaks of Taoist doctors; they took turns to push a little handcart with holy magical charms. On the shaft of this cart too dangled the bucket with the head of angry, dead Chu, which they meant to bury with his body.

The five peddlars sped through the provinces of Chihli and Kiangsu, following the line of the Imperial Canal; rich plains stretched endlessly in all directions. In Shantung they passed through New Year celebrations, noise, firecrackers. Every festival day reminded them of passing time, blew into their sails, nipped them in the calf. T'ang had a large amount of money with him, taken with threats from a merchant in Chihli before departing the villages, six solid bars of breaking-silver that he hid in the bottom of his cart under boards. They had to replenish their stock four times, change their clothing twice on the way to give them the appearance of local peddlars. In Kiangsu it was spring already. At last they had to reduce speed when Ch'en, a snake dealer, one of those who knew the dialect, was bitten in the heel while catching a viper. The little punctures grew inflamed, would not heal; on some days the whole leg swelled up like dough. The houses grew taller, had white brows; ivy, melon vines, strange broadleaved plants twined over them. Their roofs grew more ornate. Dark men came past them who spoke very fast, their voices strikingly loud and soft. Peasants rumbled by on four-wheeled buffalo carts. Broad rivers, named variously by the inhabitants, rocked whole towns of boats on which families lived. The terrible Huang-ho was crossed; once over the Huai-ho they took a more easterly course. They drew near the Lower Reaches, that lakerich region north of the Yangtze-kiang which stretched low and fertile from the dykes of the Imperial Canal to the great seadyke, the Fan Kung T'i. In the market town of Fu-an, at the southern end of the great dyke, a man named Tai was said to live. This was Wang Lun. The five peddlars rattled past estates of great salt boilers. A bustling water trade was carried on here. The dyke was planted with waving cotton bushes, oil beans, maize.

They entered Fu-an one stormy noontime, crawled to their

lodging, slept till bright morning. T'ang made himself friendly with the landlord, a sly, silent-creeping old fellow, asked him about the neighbourhood, about respectable people with money to spend and so found out where Tai lived, who apparently owned a cotton field, at present was out fishing.

The unlucky snake dealer's worsening condition, his raging fever spared them further excuses for their protracted stay. They stowed the carts at the inn. T'ang pushed his precious cart through the long village streets, the other three men trotting behind. They squatted on the bank of the Yangtse, broad as a lake, that rolled in wild billows towards the sea. They had ample time until evening to watch the muddy yellow water. As in Chihli flocks of pigeons flew overhead with the sound of Aeolian harps; it was marvellously dainty, the piping of the little whistles in their tail feathers as they approached. Low cliffs hemmed in the river on both banks, in rocky bays the bobbing and diving of Mandarin ducks. Behind the four dreaming peddlars sounds of toil rose: water carriers called, seed was hauled up to the fields, boats pulled into side channels.

Towards evening the four jumped up and rubbed their knees. A fleet of forty junks approached the village, made fast. The Chihli scouts mingled with the disembarking fishermen carrying baskets and nets off their boats. Women and children chattered below the dyke. The sky rocked and slopped like an overfull tub of purple dye, bright yellow, violet. The name Tai was shouted by bearers; a giant man with a gaunt face answered as he unloaded basket after basket from the rattling boards of a boat. The four Chihli scouts pushed into the throng. They put their arms over each other's shoulders and their lively eyes gleamed. The cries, the jostling grew louder as the fishermen stowed their catch shoulder high on long, narrow racks along the bank. T'ang stood with his friends at the bony man's rack, waited till the end of the operation. They followed Tai as he strode alone with his great dangling hands over a sunny elevation into the village. Broadshouldered T'ang's cart cut across his path. As he passed, T'ang offered the dripping barefoot man a large red shawl.

The fisherman: "Hold it higher, it'll get wet."

“Doesn’t matter,” said T’ang.

“But it’ll make our ground red.” The bony man’s grin grew wider, he slipped past the cart. They moved on with him. T’ang swept his cart right across the path that led between erect t’ung trees. Tai, coming to a halt, addressed a furious “Ho-ooh!” at the clumsy peddlar. But the peddlar, holding on to his cart that sought to keep up its momentum, with his free left hand grabbed the salt bucket from the handle: he wanted to show him something else, he’d picked up the wrong thing just now; this was red as well. The fisherman’s wrinkling nose shrank back from the neckstump that thrust up from the rosy crusted salt. The other three ambled up, held the unsteady cart. T’ang stood politely beside the fisherman, whose little eyes hopped from one to the other. Placing the bucket on the ground he pulled old Chu’s head out by the stump, laid it face up on the salt. Tai bent lower, lower over it, squattered without a word beside the bucket, thrusting away T’ang’s hand. He seemed to be telling off identifying marks on the stinking blackbrown corpse face: the little matted beard, the furrowed skin, the thick pads around the eyes, the projecting jaw. Then he peered at the wood of the bucket, shoved the head back in, jumped up, wiped his hands in the sand and shaking his fist at the four called them scoundrels, strode away to the village.

The five of them conferred in their lodging, in the snake dealer’s room. T’ang had to calm the others. Did they really think four bent backs and a grin could have settled the matter.

The landlord already knew they’d spoken to Tai, that he hadn’t bought anything from them. He advised them to wait very early by the river, where the cormorant fishers cast off. Men and women would be there in crowd. They weren’t exactly dependent on Tai’s closed purse.

As the sharp morning wind emptied its swollen whistling bag of air over the river the four men stood among the preparations. Dozens of long rafts bobbed on the water, narrow, slightly upswept at the bow. Several were gliding upstream in the pale grey morning light, steered by men at the bows pushing poles. As Tai dragged

three long oars behind him over the sand the four peddlars separated from the crowd to go up to him. At the same time Tai saw them and called out. They leapt into action. After throwing nets and oars onto the raft, a broad one, they climbed onto it with him. To each of the men, walking slowly around them, he assigned a place and an oar. Beside each place on the heaving boards stood a tall basket. In the stern of the raft trained birds shrieked and hopped: cormorants.

While the fishermen followed the current, glided around rocks and sandbanks the birds dived, bobbed in front of the rafts, brought up in their beaks spattering fish that they dropped into the baskets, pecked at. The rowers, unsteady, splaylegged, spoke together in the Chihli dialect, not turning. Tai asked where they were staying in the village and where the bucket was. After T'ang answered and began uninvited to speak of Chu's death, Tai then requesting him in equable tones to do his work, that'd be best for him, they all fell silent. Slowly they floated, steered by Wang, towards a black vertical cliff, let the others raft pass by. The yellow water foamed, rippled under their bare feet. The birds fluttered.

Wang Lun turned round. "I already threatened you yesterday. You're wasting your time coming here here with old Chu's head. I'll throw you in the water."

T'ang retorted that one of them was still at the inn; they weren't afraid.

The fisherman glared at him disdainfully, thrust at the rock. They floated on over the current. While they were calmly working, Wang suddenly screamed out: it was childish, it was despicable, dragging Chu's head through all those provinces. What for? Who were they trying to please? Chu was old, he'd lived through a lot, wandered enough provinces. They might have left him his rest.

T'ang retorted that finally Chu had gone with the fighters. He'd wanted to fight on without rest against those foxes, those scalpers the Manchus. And this was now granted him.

"How so?" asked Wang.

T'ang took a step closer. "You know the answer. He's calling you

to battle." His eyes blazed.

Wang Lun threatened, "I'll throw you in the water."

T'ang was scornful. "The cormorants will put us back in your baskets."

Wang Lun: "The sharks'll eat you."

Wang Lun and T'ang squared up, brandishing oars. T'ang's oar fell. He dropped to his knees. "I'm going to jump in the water. You want me to?"

As the fisherman moved forward menacingly, the peddlar stepped to the edge of the raft, the cormorants came whirring up. The bony man said thickly to the peddlar, "Get to your place." Some birds had swallowed the threshing fish as they flew. Canes whistled onto their backs; cawing the cormorants opened their bills, the fish slithered bloody into the baskets. The current tugged more strongly at the raft. The oarsmen braked and struggled with the water. Wang's raft turned slowly towards the rest of the flotilla, which layoff a low settlement with flat roofs. While they leaned on their long poles against the river bottom, the fisherman cast wild looks at the toiling peddlars from under his enormous straw hat.

To Tang, who stood nearest him, he called, "Who put you on my boat?"

"You did."

Wang raged. His steering pole slid sideways. They drifted.

"You're lying. You're all liars, good-for-nothings, idlers. Admit it. What do you mean coming to me for work? Your baskets are half empty. See how the cormorants are gorging, you apes. I've no use for the likes of you. Oh, such rogues would have to come across my path. And there are so many upright people here."

In his rage he quite forgot to steer. Young Tang balanced across, bent to the steering pole, was grabbed by the shoulder and thrown back. Dripping, wordless, Tang slunk back to his basket, began to shiver.

Again Wang guided them slowly towards the flotilla. A thunderstorm was approaching with blue slate clouds, deep bass rumblings. The waves pressed themselves strangely flat. At once the

chastised Tang, apparently losing his composure, began to scold: “If only it’d let loose, smash everything! Everything ought to be smashed, flung into the water. I wish it was.”

Wang watched him with flinty eyes. “You too? We’re going ashore. Nothing happens that quickly, Tang. The dragon won’t let loose. Only in made-up stories, I know that. No wishes. Just—no wishes.”

In a noodle shop they found in the little settlement, Wang treated the four as fellow natives of Shantung. Wang, like the others devouring a bowl of meat broth, immersed himself in the details of a fusty local quarrel. He settled back snugly, told them about his wife’s father who wanted to sell him the best part of his maize fields cheaply.

An old man, Wang’s friend, late in the afternoon steered the raft back with the muscle power of the four peddlars. Wang himself sailed with a neighbour, a well-to-do fisherman who had detained him.

The strangers spent the evening in Wang’s old cottage. He presented his young wife to them, a little smiling thing that gazed at the strangers in wonder, twice asked anxiously about their business, retired.

When Wang, having led her out tenderly by the hands, returned he stood in front of them by the doorpost as they squatted on the floormat and slurped tea; stretched out crossed wrists.

“Well?”

When they didn’t move, just blinked at him: “Didn’t you bring anything? Shame.”

His arms dropped. “It’d be simpler if you just tied me up and dragged me away. Instead of all this talking. But you seem so sure of yourselves. You can manage without ropes.”

The mat rustled, he sat by them, they cleared throats, said nothing.

“Tell me your names now and where you come from. Don’t tell me any more than that. It’s not necessary.”

Softly they named themselves.

“Now I know you. You four or five must think it’s a brave thing coming all this way from Chihli through Shantung and Kiangsu here to the great dyke? Once I made a great journey, to Shantung. Especially you, Tang, you have a sly face. Really, you’re heroes. It’s not because you left the bucket with Chu’s head in it with your sick friend. The landlord found out about the head a long time ago. But you’re quite wrong if you think you’ve compromised me so I have to leave the Lower Reaches. I’m not so easily caught, you tame rabbits. Tell me now, you with the crooked shoulder, how did you come upon the Truly Powerless?”

One of the linguists among the Chihli emissaries, whose shoulder drooped, bowed: “I lacked for nothing in my village. My family is not poor. You’re a great worker of wonders.”

“I know, I know. That’s how it should be. It’s as if I’d sprayed poison around me. It goes on and on. Now tell me. How is it you’ve come here, sit here like this? You don’t need to be afraid of me. I’m not impenitent like my brother Ma No was when I spoke to him. When I saw you standing there on the bank I knew everything. My fate, my whole fate, my wife’s too. I’d been expecting you, feared your arrival for months! Everything’s going to pieces. Feared it. Oh.”

“Does Wang Lun know,” Tang’s voice came after a silence, “that his roar is that of a lion, a slothful lion being driven from its cage?”

“I did too much for you, so much. You don’t give even a copper cash in return. You just flash these words at me, grind me down. You’re digging me out. You want to take me back to Chihli so I can be sacrified in the right spot, or to Shantung. I’ll be sacrificed in Chinan-fu. What a lot of fuss you make about things. How many more of you has the Emperor Ch’ien-lung slaughtered? Say a thousand, ten thousand, twenty thousand. Any day now you’ll be counting men again, a few more, a few less. Every day the women on the boats crush the heads of little maggots; that’s why I’m not disturbed, why none of you dares move even from here to the k’ang. It’s all the same—it makes me rage to say it—what the Emperor does or the women do or a fever of the bowels does, it’s got nothing to do with me. Nowhere is it written that I’ll be struck down if ten

thousand, a hundred thousand are struck down in Chihli. Why do you pursue me like ghosts? I owe you nothing. I can't help it, I can't help it." It was quite dark. They sat on the floor, heads dangling, couldn't see one another.

"What sacrifices I've made, what they've taken from me! Yes, it's me they come after with such things. Murdered friends. Severed heads. As if I was a fairground booth, a peepshow they had to fill. I'm glad my father and mother are dead, otherwise someone would up and strike them dead, bring me a nice portable leg, a salted face, a well wrapped piece of my mother's breast. To make me more amenable. It's my fate. I know it. I'll come with you. I have a wife, a farm, cotton, a raft, people respect me. They dump a pickled head in a bucket in front of me and I'm supposed to dine on it and leave everything behind."

Wang paced around the room. A flint struck, the little oil lamp glowed up on the stovebed. Wang paced some more, sagged beside them, a long bast-wrapped object on his knees. When he removed the bast a long shining sword glinted. They lowered their heads again quickly. Wang Lun cradled Yellow Leaper in his arms.

Next morning the carts drove at first light out of the lodging house, the snake dealer hobbling and needing support. They went north from the village. Behind the village the slow moving train of five peddlars was overtaken by the great bent figure in the straw hat.

Wang spat at them: why had they sneaked away so furtively, so the landlord had to send to him to tell him his countrymen were leaving? The peddlars looked shamefaced at one another. The one with the crooked shoulder sniffed: "We were ashamed. We were sorry we ever came here. We don't want to be blamed for what you said."

"We're brothers," uttered Tang. "We don't want to force you."

Wang Lun turned on Tang, withered him with anger: "You cowards, you're ashamed, don't want to be blamed! Why not?"

"What's the point of scolding?"

"I just have to puff a little and you run away. Emissaries—you!

They don't run away, I can tell you, and they aren't afraid. Why shouldn't you force me, you Simpleton, why shouldn't you be blamed? That's my Truly Powerless all over. Truly, truly powerless."

Wang Lun urged them to move on, they could be seen in the morning grey from the village. At the last marker stone of the village they witnessed Wang's parting grief. He was leaving his land, his wife. Then they moved on separately, Wang Lun with Tang. Wang was uncommunicative. Their days were passed in walking, hiding, the furtive purchase and begging of rice, melons and water. Tang couldn't shake off the feeling that he was escorting a prisoner back to Chihli. Wang, who at night often spoke softly to himself, seemed to be wrestling inwardly, holding himself down. Tang noticed shrewdly that the only things the uncanny man allowed himself to speak of, grasping at them lustfully, greedily, were bloody deeds of the Ili troops, cruel violations, tortures of the brothers that he soaked up with pleasure. Tang even heard him telling himself fragments of such stories at night. The young peddlar feared for his life at his companion's side. Occasionally Wang cast reproaches at him, asserted grimly that he'd been waiting a long time for them with horror. But they must have him. They must have him. The young peddlar bewailed the fix he'd landed himself in, considered running away, but it was obvious that Wang was keeping an eye on him. He didn't dare ask the fisherman.

Until the tension between them slowly slackened the other side of the Huang-ho, where Wang began to show some interest in the local inhabitants, challenged T'ang to races and, having wrapped himself in the yellow brocade cloak of an itinerant Taoist savant, strutted strangely lighthearted. They enjoyed the spring, the approaching summer. Wang's easy mood died away, disquiet, impatience languished about him. The nearer they drew to the hills of Shantung, the less able he was to control himself. Behind one village he ripped off the Taoist cloak, put on his grey torn beggar's rags with a shout of joy. His sword hung on a string around his neck. Tirelessly he questioned his companion about events of the last few years, checked out villages. After leaving the homeward wending T'ang

alone for half a day he disappeared completely near Chinan-fu. He left T'ang one task: he was to spread the word among the brothers and sisters that they were not to lose one another. The tide would turn.

Wang strode as years before the hard coal roads of Shantung. Pillars of smoke, grimy columns in the air. Undulating ground. On a bare stony plain the great city of Poshan. Ch'en Yao-fen had long expected a visit from Wang Lun. News of the tragedy in the Mongolian town had filled the merchant with tremendous awe for his former guest. During the winter and up till now, conferences of the leaders of the White Waterlily had taken place. They were undivided in their disgust at the measures taken by the Emperor, who favoured foreign lamas and had the native movement suppressed by force.

As Wang Lun ducked through the back door of the house and appeared beside the altar from behind the wallscreen, Ch'en Yao-fen flung his arms around the great ragged beggar's shoulders and held him tight. Wang asked if they were alone and if he didn't want to fetch the others. The merchant sounded the gong. They sat in the hall under the panelled ceiling, from which embossed iron birds and dragons hung with lamps and lanterns. The beggar refused his tea; with proud gestures, throwing back his cloak, he showed the merchant Yellow Leaper. Ch'en, taking up the sword and with just a glance at the inlaid symbols, told of an officer who'd claimed to belong to one of the Imperial banners, had appeared four times in Poshan to ask Ch'en about Wang Lun. He called himself Hai, claimed to be colonel in a cavalry regiment, a most courteous, gaunt man with a dangling beard and moustaches. Wang, excited, asked for more. Yes, the man also called himself Yellow Bell. He'd implored Ch'en to look for Wang, who was doubtless wandering around griefstricken at Ma No's death, and direct him to a certain barracks in Peking where Hai was posted. Ch'en had promised without understanding any of it, for the man was not talkative and

might be a spy. After Wang's explanation Ch'en wandered, arms crossed, over his carpets. He was astounded. The whole face of things was altered. Wang Lun's eyes too glittered.

Sedan chairs halted in front of the house. The curtains rustled. Amazement of the rich merchants at the sight of the ragged man, whom they failed to recognize, then friendly armshaking and whispers.

"Air!" cried Wang, "air, air!" He hugged Ch'en, who restrained himself with difficulty. With icy calm Wang addressed the twenty elegant gentlemen, who listened in a mixture of horror and awe. They flinched from him. He used naive expressions; announced that he didn't intend sticking to the old path; he needed money to arm men and pay them. It was shameful, but they were forced to it. Perhaps his brothers and sisters hadn't done what was normal, traditional, but he wouldn't see them annihilated. Nor should the White Waterlily. They'd promised protection; now he'd come to secure it.

The gentlemen questioned. Some were hesitant: should all strings be played at once and the smouldering popular uprising fanned up? The occasion was too trivial. The whole business affected only two northern provinces. The huge South knew nothing of it. They would dare what could be dared. The Emperor Ch'ien-lung had aroused admiration, never sympathy. By favouring lamaism, terrible persecutions, he had sown hatred. The cowardice, misgivings of the merchants had long receded. Ch'en, interrupted numerous times by Wang, revealed Yellow Bell's visits and their import. Shoulders, queues were grasped; Ch'en was surrounded.

"Expulsion of the Manchus!" came the whisper. The clan marked, the Emperor half mad, the sons criminals, without respect.

"The Banner troops are deserting," they cried laughing to one another. What an insult to the province, to place the bloodspattered murderers of Ili before the town gates. The Emperor has no love for the people.

Ice flowed through the limbs of the gentlemen as Wang explained with emphatic gestures that the Truly Powerless themselves would

be armed at the start of the struggle. It was imperative for the followers of Wu-wei to take up the sword. They must set aside their purity and their hopes like fine clothes and incense, place them on an altar and sacrifice before it. They must sacrifice Imperial troops, the last dynasty, themselves; nothing else was left. As Wang brought all this out, the gentlemen looked away from him, controlled themselves with difficulty.

Ch'en gesticulated as he spoke. Ringed fingers, warm wafts of air, rustling. Wang breathed heavily, his furrowed brow twitched. The gentlemen should consider giving him money for arms and soldiers. Sending their followers to him, to join the Truly Powerless. No one could tell how it would turn out. They shouldn't set too much store by it, shouldn't think all lost for ever if things went badly. In a powerful voice that rang out from deep under his ribcage he concluded: for him the time for standing by was over. His task was set, once for all. Quickly, in the next day or two, they had to make their decision, so that things could be brought to a head before winter. Again talk turned to Yellow Bell. Ch'en drew Wang aside to the great wallscreen. Whispering they sat around the little tables, huddled in corners.

The outcome of the two days of deliberation was that trusted individuals, whose names Wang was told, would be instructed to place at his disposal with the utmost despatch any sum he asked; the White Waterlily would be mobilized in the northern provinces; guilds alerted for active participation as soon as fighting broke out; plans for uprisings in various towns prepared at once; whether action was feasible or worthwhile in any place must be decided on the spot. Advantage should be taken of the situation to remove unpopular, unjust or corrupt mandarins.

Wang tramped back along the coal road in the heat. The hills where he had so often lain concealed embraced him. When the plains of Chinan-fu shimmered ahead he gave them not a glance, sped unheeding to the northwest. Herds of sheep, kaoliang fields, rice mills, dry ditches, army patrols. Not a beggar on the highways: imprisoned, murdered, driven into towns. No brothers, no Truly

Powerless! The league with the spirit of the waters, soil, trees—tom up, driven ruthlessly behind mud walls to rot!

Wang was still travelling as a Taoist savant with uneasy Tang through Kiangsu when Yellow Bell, referred to Ngo in his search for Wang, entered Hochien with his two servants and took lodgings in the clan house of a friendly family. The two spry servants, utterly loyal to their nobleminded master, scouting around one spring morning in the squares, on the walls, flushed out the former captain, now drill instructor of a town officials' club, living quietly in the house of a Controller of Audit. Ngo, reserved, already half withdrawn from the cause of the Wu-wei, sat many evenings with Yellow Bell in a pavilion in the Controller's garden. Yellow Bell explained that, in case Wang didn't turn up soon, he wanted Ngo to help him organize resistance to the government. He could vouch for his regiment; other officers had joined the cause. The task of organizing the masses must fall to others.

Ngo, listless, oppressed by the memory of Wang's departure, healed under Yellow Bell's gentle decisiveness. When Yellow Bell rode out through the town gate on his white stallion, his servants following, Ngo dressed respectably in black walking beside him, beggars, brothers emerged to join them, noisily greeting longlost Ngo, wailing. Yellow Bell, recalling Ma No and lovely Liang-li, weeping turned his head away, then softly greeted the beggars: brothers. When they reached the hill that Wang had rolled down in the snow, raging in his grief for Ma No, Ngo could not go on. He took his leave of Yellow Bell, who stood up in the stirrups, saluted with his sabre, galloped away beneath white blossoming trees.

Large numbers of Truly Powerless had taken refuge in Hochien; the White Waterlily was in charge. Ngo leapt into action.

The guilds of oil dealers, coolies and smiths had a common clubhouse in the town. The unimposing building with its refectories, small theatre accommodated these labouring men in innumerable rooms, eating, talking, leavetaking, sleeping, listening to music, smoking. The rumour of Wang Lun's reappearance exploded among them. Amid reports of troop movements under Chao Hui,

instructions buzzed from the Shantung Committee not to undertake any assaults on soldiers. In the club they all shouted at one another. At one evening's debate an old smith whose little property near Linch'ing had been burned waved his arms groaning, cursed the dynasty, compared it to a parasitical plant. The most imposing of the coolies was called Li, a robust, upright man who belonged to the Truly Powerless, had lived in the town since the summer of the Broken Melon. During the conference a young man came from the neighbouring house into the long hall, held his hands giggling to his mouth, reported by fits and starts, with wild haunted looks, that the gentlemen ought to watch out: police with a crowd of soldiers were searching the house where Li lived with his clansmen. The coolie himself—. Since the young man didn't continue beyond this point the closepacked labourers fell on him, the smith banged him on the back, made a movement towards the breathless halfwit's throat.

Then two elderly guildsmen slipped in, barred the door, gasped that Li had been taken; police had been accompanied by soldiers who had Li's head in a cage suspended from their lances. His clansmen had been carried off to prison. The young man nodded blubbing. The confusion of whispers ceased, confusion of fear, fury and menace: everyone wanted to go home.

Li had heard of Wang's imminent arrival from the southwest and had set off to meet him with two long knives and a concealed dagger. Passing a troop of soldiers in his beggar's garb not far from the town, his calmness attracted attention. They stopped him; he stated name, address. The affair ended as it had done for Chu and countless others. Asked if he belonged to the Truly Powerless he replied that he was a beggar, going about his business; seized for searching he defended himself, quickly lost his life; his head returned northeastwards.

The troop of soldiers was billeted in an ancient yamen inside the town walls. Night watchmen beat the first night watch. Guildsmen squatted in the long hall of the clubhouse by curtained windows. When one of them opened the door at a prearranged knock, a lone lean unknown man came in, was quickly seized. A light shone on his

face, which was darkened with soot. It was Ngo. Several hissed: what did he want there. His stirring among little groups of acquaintances was well-known. Politely he asked for protection. He was afraid for himself, having been warned by the Controller; now he was warning them. Word was about that the authorities were waiting for large numbers of soldiers so they could pounce on suspect guilds. Nervous men, coming around the low tables with their teacups, shouted: they didn't need his warnings. What was he trying to stir up?

Ngo freed his right arm, showed three large starshaped bum scars inflicted on him at his own wish by Ma No. "My arms aren't a pretty Sight. At first I took these scars for a sign of my liberation. Now for a sign that I'm fettered. If you curse me and tarry you'll wear other fetters, gentlemen. pheasants are calling, leopards, lions roar. You know well enough what golden pheasants I mean, the panthers of Chao Hui's army, the literati-lions. But curse away!"

"You were a panther yourself! Look at your hands. No working man has such soft fingers."

"Why've you broken out of your cage, Ngo?"

"He thinks he's better than the soldiers out there."

"Curse away. I shan't sully these scars by letting you gape at them. If I'm a panther, then you are cats and dogs. I'm sorry I disturbed you. Rather, dogs is too good. Rabbits, woodworms, maggots."

"Rabble-rouser!"

"It appears that only those with loud mouths and no livers are coming forward."

The smith pulled Ngo's sleeve up. "Hold your tongues! I'll get me marks like these. Three burns, one under the other. You loudmouths won't need any marks on your arms. You'll be branded on the forehead soon enough and have your heads cut off."

"What's the good of scolding, smith? How can we help it? We're not going to set on the troops and be crushed like flies. Hypocrite, rabble-rouser!"

"He's a fool, a fo-priest!"

“He led Li astray, now he comes here with his nose in the air.”

“Let me be what I will. You are not my brothers.”

A man sprang possessed around a table and clapped his hands: “We don’t want to be your brothers. We don’t want to be your brothers. Don’t listen to him, throw him out, he’s dangerous, he’ll bring disaster on us all. I have a father and three small children!”

“Let Ngo say what he has to say. Ngo, speak up.”

“Brothers, I’m staying here. I shan’t leave this room, shan’t bring disaster on you. Douse the light, they’ll see shadows from outside.”

Into the dark animated room two little square windows of paper, illuminated by the moon, gazed like terrified eyes. Scraping, grumbling along the walls. “He’ll bring disaster on us!”

“I ignore your insults because I feel sorry for you. In a couple of weeks, months it will all be over. Wang Lun is on his way. The White Waterlily, your league, has sent word to you from Shantung of what’s going to happen. They haven’t yet put a cangue around your necks; your houses are still standing. Soldiers have already entered the town. I’m not ranting like an agitator. We Truly Powerless can find our own path without any help; we can’t miss it.”

“Stop dreaming, Ngo. Go on!”

“I’m not going to tell you anything about our Western Paradise. The Truly Powerless don’t yearn for the black river; they shouldn’t cut us down like weeds. I can’t speak of an enemy; but if there is one, then he’s yours as well. And that’s why I’m speaking to you, and that’s why you must listen to me. Your lives, parents, children depend on it.”

The smith hissed, “There’s no justice for us little folk, no justice. No Gods hear us, only the spies of the God of Death. Everyone’s against us: the Emperor’s the Son of Heaven, every spirit of the towns and walls, rivers, fields is at his command. Rejoice that violence shall be visited on the traitors to the land. See, I rejoice!”

Ngo’s teeth chattered. “We’ve been thrown from our course. We can’t let our brothers and sisters be slaughtered. All of us moan and wail, as I do. I’m no rabble-rouser; I am grieved that you should take me for one. Oh, what are you thinking of to drive us away? How

can I look on the bloodbath they'll unleash on us and on your numerous kin? Have you ever heard of Ma No? Don't stand there dumb; listen to the smith. Wasn't Li dear to you, whose ghost is hovering around this door? I'm not bringing you disaster. I've cast myself off from parents, ancestors, honours. Do you think I did it for nothing and for nothing? You're pitiless, blind. I'm no different. I fling open doors, rip paper from the windows and cry into the street: I am Ngo, once a captain of the Imperial Guard, on whom the Emperor bestowed a little bag of peppermint; I'm a friend of Wang Lun, of dead Ma No, of murdered Li, sit here in the guildhouse deserted by the guilds who ought to stand with me, are too cowardly to stand with me. I cry it into the streets so that the ghosts, evil, restless souls in the mud of the street, in the branches hear it. Like us Truly Powerless they have no place on earth, no salvation, no kind looks, no incense; they'll hear me. Help me, help me, dear wicked ghosts!"

And already he was spouting the names of wicked demons, the mere naming of which can bring death. Rhythmically the old necromancer swayed his head back and forth, called out the unholy names. Fearfully guildsmen crowded together in the corners, thrust fingers in their ears, wrung their hands. The smith called to them: he'd better tie Ngo up, lock him in a room. The smith and Ngo whispered together. Suddenly they all gathered round the two men, squatted down, whispered, pupils and nostrils wide with excitement at the spirit masters. Ngo, breathing calmly again, stared straight before him, bowed his head.

In the marketplace stood the most imposing building in the entire quarter: the Town God's temple. It rose from among shops and stalls; behind it a broad park with lovely flowerbeds and a conservatory. Without a thought, market hawkers threw their rubbish and their sweepings in front of the redpainted wooden porch. Sometimes acrobats jumped high enough to touch the green tassels of the hanging lanterns. Beggars and blind musicians loafed in droves between two stone Pekinese at the sides of the entrance. These grey beasts, eyes bulging like eggs, had ruffled tails: one like a

fan, the other like a spread peacock's tail. High double roofs swept up like ships' prows; on their black ribs armoured horsemen, halberds, dangling swords and daggers glinted. On the highest roofrib a silver warrior strode between two archers bearing shields, who took aim at those below. People shoved through the porch, thronged to theatricals in the temple courtyard. Barbers shaved in the aisles, lily hawkers yelled; street sweepers, public and private, went up and down, collected filth with rakes and shovels. Dusty urchins played at tiles.

In front of the prayer hall in the centre of the huge courtyard a stage stood open on all sides. The erectors had heaped every splendour above it, the flamboyance garish against the restrained magnificence of the temple. It rose from the ground like a dancing girl whose round gaze makes the world disappear. Eight smooth pillars of wood thrust up a high roof, whose four violently upswung prows ended over the eaves, as if the movement rolling silently down the temple roof was meant to rebound back on high. Red and blue tassels, pennants, bells from the eaves. Above the black roofribs white horses clattered; the wild warriors' metal ornaments, weapons tinkled. High under the roof an animal crept outwards from the pillars, snuggled stretched on its belly, high under the roof unfurled iridescent wings, buried its white beak in the wood, red-gold glittering back: birdbeast, the Phoenix.

From behind the stage, so lofty that nothing of its roofridge could be seen from the yard, rose the temple. Not broad in the leg; like a peasant, but (this was its secret) it resembled the hunchback: cicada-catcher in Lieh-tzu: he balanced little balls of earth on a lime rod; when he could keep five balls there one behind the other, he was ready and could catch cicadas just so, holding his: arm out like a dry branch, his body like a tree trunk. His will had; condensed without cracking. Mighty the temple stood there, heard nothing of the players' music; it concealed the bustle of conceit, let through mockingly little light onto the collection of spirits, gods that it protected. Misfortune lay on it. The wooden statue of the town god, a month ago still richly clad, adorned with a seal, lay violated in the

gloom. An unworthy idol had been elevated to town god. When the disturbances, attacks, outbreaks of arson came, the magistrate had him stripped naked and, to aggravate his punishment, dragged to the porch and chains hung around his neck. When peace returned he was taken back to his place, dressed in a cheap shirt and gown; blackened by sunlight and indignities he stood silent in the dead stillness of the room. None of the many brightly coloured assistants who stood around him, secretaries, spies, executioner, snoops, policemen, had any doubt that the goaded, strongwilled god would soon dare his all. The town had brought forth a demon.

Close by the temple entrance lay a secret entrance to the great pawnshop that served the guilds, secret societies for a meeting place. The rebels felt safest in this place next to the dwelling of the protector of the walls and moats. The long low storeroom was closely packed with household objects, bundles of clothing, theatrical costumes, ornaments, sedan chairs. An oily smell rose from bundles and chests. On most days rats and mice were all that moved. On the third day after Ngo's discussion in the guildhouse more than three hundred people squatted here—it was after the market had closed—silent and waiting. They sat everywhere, mostly everyday clothes. Greetings, nods, the strangest postures. Most knew each other, leaders of the principal societies, brothers, sisters of the Wu-wei sect, silent Ngo. The smith called softly to a white bearded man, "Won't the old teacher tell the guests what they would like to hear?"

The resonant voice of the teacher: "Most respectful greetings. This ignorant slave would not presume to instruct you. His doddering head knows nothing any more. This moribund gives thanks that he is able to be with you all!"

Many sat down around him. A small pair of steps was pushed towards him. Ngo made a profound bow: "Would the old gentleman please instruct us." Others called out the same. The teacher smiled to all sides, chewed his toothless mouth; he clambered up two rungs.

"I come from the village in Shantung where the sage Lo Huai was born. He is our great teacher. He did well to find this warehouse, with its clothes and bundles, for a sober pious gathering place. Great

powers and forces there are; but whether you follow Wang Lun or are just friendly to him, you know that we don't pray to a thousand Buddhas like the bonzes and fo-priests. We leave the Tashi-lama and the Dalai-lama to Emperor Ch'ien-lung. Our Buddha looks on us from Heaven, from hills and streams; thunderclaps are a better greeting for him than trumpets and gongs. His incense is the clouds and winds; he drinks his tea from the five lakes and the four seas and hearkens to the rustling of the leaves and branches, the rustling of his own waving banners. We have no other Buddha than the warm wind and rain, no Buddha, oh woe, than the typhoons that sweep along the coast. No one is with us, southward, westward or here at home. We blackhaired sons of Han are alone. We are yellow like the soil, like water. Those who live in the soft south are bloated, frisk in gay clothes. On the river of the Black Dragon the land is as hard as the people. And so they all survive. Our houses rise unremarkable like firmrooted cress from the earth, heeding the spiritual pulses and the currents of the air. Thus we make ourselves like the Tao, the way of the world, deny it nothing. We who have been taken up by Wang Lun are not shackled to fate by cangue and legirons. As the ancient words say: to be weak in the face of fate is a man's only triumph. We must come to consciousness before the Tao, embrace it; then it follows like a child. This old dribbler makes no sense, oh, he is ashamed of his feeble mind."

The old man moved down one rung, crouched, a white monkey, and closed his eyes. Deep in thought many of the rawboned men sat in the gangways; groups crouched on huge bundles and looked across, pressed the bundles flat.

A well-dressed young man, opening his fan, stood on a rickety Eight Immortals table across from the old man's ladder. People turned to look as the table creaked. He spoke in a rapid voice.

"The old gentleman and my worthy comrades won't take it amiss if I speak up. I shan't try to emulate the old gentleman. We have no splendid temples, no monasteries decorated by the Dragon Son and showered with gold ingots. No silk-clad bonzes pray for us, leading sons and daughters of the East astray. Foreign altars evoke in us just

laughter, shoulder-shrugging. I too take the pure path and seek the chi. We and our descendants want to approach the pinnacle of Imperial power. But however you others who don't hold with us friends of Wu-wei think of us: we are of the East, and not yellow bonzes; we are children of the hundred families, and not holy men and dignitaries from the Mountain of Mercy, received by the Emperor in triumphal procession. He came down here from Tibet, died in the Huang-szu, was sent home in a golden stupa. The foreigners all stick together, the Manchus and lamas. The lamaseries devour the soft warm tripes of our land; that's permitted; but we, we have our heads cut off though we demand nothing, disturb no one. We in our thousands-but you know us, dear respected brothers, you coolie gentlemen from the junks and the others. We were born of the yellow earth, and peaceable as we are don't want to be driven out by foreign priests and emperors. We should have control over the Eighteen Provinces, from Liaotung to the lands of the Miao. What have we done? Rampaging scoundrels in soldiers' uniforms strut with their halberds through our market places. Who'll be shackled today, whose tongue will be cut out, who'll be flogged tomorrow? We were born in this province and should be allowed to fare peaceably in it."

A general murmur: "Good, good."

The young man tottering excited on the table continued speaking. The old man tried to calm him with huzzas.

"Do you know who our most poisonous enemies are? Our enemy and yours? What's our enemy called? The rock, the tree trunk, the broken lute? K'ung-tzu!"

It was taken up in the gangways: "The mandarins, the literati, K'ung-tzu, K'ung-tzu!" A general: "K'ung-tzu!" With a grinding of teeth: "The oppressers, the mandarins!" Goading: "K'ung-tzu!"

More rasping from the unsteady Eight Immortals table: "Who is Confucius? What does he want? The third evil! He taught us to wash our mouths, comb our hair, bow to princes, many good things, many bad. For us poor people he died long ago and has nothing more to say. Manchus, lamas and mandarins pray to him, and so we can't

pray to him. They've snatched him away from us, taken away from us what was good in him. His soul in Peking ought to be glad we don't burn incense to him, but sweep him from our doorways with harsh words. I hate him, we all hate him, the empty tin pan. The wise old gentleman who spoke before me was right: we must be weak in the face of fate, we have no other choice. We're poor. Whoever throws away all he has, does well; but even he loses his head, like Li as he strolled. Oppressers, alien wolves, crocodiles, foxes are our fate. The Manchu swagger in their offices, cheat their way through the exams, overturn our carts and sedan chairs in the street, tramp paths wide with their broad feet. The villainous, godless dynasty! Their fate will be fulfilled, before ours or after ours. The longnoses will destroy the land, and it is all K'ung-tzu's fault. We have nothing left but powerlessness."

He had grown calmer as he spoke, cast off a mocking agitating shrillness in his tone, gestures, movements. Women walked about sobbing. Excited groups formed, dissolved, formed again. The young orator, drops of sweat on his pale forehead, sauntered shoulder to shoulder with Ngo down a gangway. Tears had sprung unbidden even into Ngo's eyes. The magic word "Ming" hung in the air. It cropped up in every gathering of the White Waterlily, often among the Truly Powerless, as in other gatherings the chi-plant, the Isles of the East, the Western Paradise.

The long room was lit by many small paper windows. It grew dark. The rattling, rustling, drumming, calling, crying in the marketplace, temple yard died away. Through windows on the room's narrow side, sheaves of light poured from the yard onto baskets, utensils. During the young man's speech soft music, fine singing had been heard, now a declamation: the play was beginning.

While the crowd jostled, wrinkled brows, gave off a stink of sweat, two elderly men from the coolies' guild grasped a little potbellied man by the arms and tried to pull him to the steps. This man, clean-garbed, sleek, was an educated man who owned a farm and a windmill for husking rice, and like many others held to the

Ming tradition out of respect for his ancestors.

On the steps he smacked his lips, inundated by happy voices, bowed; people pressed about him. His head lay low between round padded shoulders. As he spoke, his little hands moved drolly up and down, left and right. He smiled. His performance was a showpiece, a hit. He said, in his soft, dark voice, “Once there was an abbot.” Several in the audience sang it back at him, lulled, showing their gums in delight. The man pulled his queue to his chest, stroked it like a child.

“Once there was an abbot. He lived at peace in his monastery. When the sun shone hot one noontime the abbot laid his hat on his face, fell asleep. He dreamed. He dreamed of a council of the gods. He saw the Three Great Pure Ones at a table, with them the Jade Lord, the charitable son of King Pure Virtue and Queen Moonlight. What I tell you is half a fairy tale. So the Jade Lord bent down to the abbot, raised his shoulders to tell a secret, said, ‘I’m going to have a woman wander into your monastery. She’ll be the mother of a great emperor. She’ll bear him under my sign: Sun and Moon.’ When the abbot woke up, he asked the porter whether any woman had come by. None had. The pious man went through every cell, every hall, climbed up to the hills, down into the caves. No child’s cry. In the evening a hawker with his cartload of junk came to the gate. His pregnant wife was with him. Both were dressed in rags. Sadly the abbot gave them pills so the birth would go right. The whole monastery slept. In the morning the child came. Soft music of flutes and panpipes was in the air, birds pecked the paper from the window where the mother lay. They perched as thick as on lime rods and warbled to the crying of the child. A halo appeared around the sun. So poor was the father that he had to fish a piece of red silk out of the river to wrap the child in. Little Yuan-chang, the trembling little maggot Yuan-chang was wrapped in a rag of red silk.

“And when he grew bigger he had to follow the cowherds into the meadows. Was himself a cowherd. And one day when there were five of them out there in the meadow he wanted to give them a treat. He went off, slaughtered a calf, stuck its tail in a cleft in the

rocks. Yuan-chang stuck the calf's tail in a cleft in the rocks. And then they called him their captain. But the man who owned the calf looked for the creature, found the tail. Took a rod, and two rods, and the boy had to flee in sorrow. Hungering through the meadows went Yuan-chang. But the Sun showed him the way, the Moon guided him on. A monk took him by the hand, took him to his cave, shaved his head. Yuan-chang, the shrimp Yuan-chang became cook boy in the monastery. Lamps he had to light in the rooms, censers he had to swing, heavy censers in his tender hands, herbs he had to dry, bells calling the whole day. He was in the monastery where his beggar mother had borne him. They beat him, teased him all around the house, even the abbot to whom the Jade Lord had revealed his prophecy. But once the abbot saw the boy with a ruddy glow about his face. The abbot was fearful. He sent him to the woods, to fetch kindling from across the swamp to make a fine sauce. Yuan-chang ran fast, sank in when he came to the swamp, sank in. Yuan-chang sank up to his shoulders, up to his neck, to his mouth. And as he cried out piteously and wallowed like a toad in the mire, cried for his dear father, his dear mother, out of the wood came a golden sprite. Ah, it's a fairy tale, a pretty fairy tale, my grandfather told it me. The sprite pulled him out by the fingers. And he was no longer a cook boy. The water had set lots of white pearls about his neck, he was clad in purple and brocade from his immersion in the swamp. He had a girdle with jade clasps. Bedecked with finery, Yuan-chang strolled gracefully back to the monastery like an Imperial prince. And at once the abbot knew his name."

They shoved against one another, hanging on his words, burst out powerfully with, "Ming, it was Ming!"

They went about smiling. The smith called out as rain spattered the windows, "We need a wall, a white wall around Peking!"

"Oh, why did the Mings die out? Why did the people desert them?"

"There are still Mings alive, they say there are some on the Yangtze."

"Wang Lun's supposed to be a Ming, that's why the Emperor hates him so."

“That’s just it. That’s why he hides himself away. He knows why. As soon as the Emperor catches him, he’s done for.”

“Or the Emperor’s done for.”

“Wang Lun knows he’s a Ming and the Emperor is protecting himself.”

A tremor appeared in Ngo’s delicate features. The young agitator and the teacher grinned. The old man winked at Ngo, shook his head. “They are right, and they are not right. Wang Lun is a Ming and more than a Ming.” Ngo’s eyes were shut in a reverie. “I should like to see Wang Lun soon.” “Yes, Ngo, we all need him.” Ngo sighed: “I’m not made for such deeds. If someone doesn’t take the load off me, I shall be the first to fall in battle.” Both the others lowered their heads too.

The old man and the agitator separated from Ngo. They took part in the radiance of faces, pumping of hands, walking up and down, stumbling in the gangways. Scrapings, rhythmic footfalls, giggling permeated the muffled turmoil. In a side alley someone had lost his wits, was indulging in bizarre grimaces, puffing himself up, jerking his head. Two others strutted in front of him: “Make way for the Taot’ai!”, jostled those in front and at the sides, always pouncing on the one nearest them. He wore coarse sacking instead of a gown. On his smoothshaven skull he had placed a piece of gourd to represent a mandarin’s button. Made grotesque faces, strutted laughably pompous behind his runners, sat all of a sudden on a low wooden bench that he dragged from a pile, pretended to gallop off uttering shrill cries. A number of other men behind him tried to ape his movements, but for laughter couldn’t keep composure, tottered; until the galloping Taot’ai turned on his bench and with a swipe of his sabre, as it were, did for one of them. The whole assemblage rocked. Even the old sage had crawled onto an ornate cabinet and grinned down from it. The man who had been struck down grabbed the Taot’ai by the shoulders, aimed a punch at him. His neighbours joined in with enthusiasm. The rider defended himself, to roars of approval from the onlookers crept under his bench; then they overturned it and began to kick him. The old man screamed down

from his cabinet: they weren't to make him angry. They broke up slowly as the rider stood up and stared at the wall. They clapped him on the shoulder.

The spokesmen of the organizing committee made their way to a corner of the low storeroom. The gathering seemed over. Conversations took place in scattered groups. Men came up to the delegates in the corner, asked for details of who was there, which guilds were represented, who would speak. The answer they got was: everyone should wait. All would soon be revealed. The whole assembly had convinced itself that Wang Lun must come. The golden word "Ming" rose from many groups. The din abated when the spokesmen and Ngo stood, pressed through the gangway, the old teacher climbed the steps. Gravity made itself felt. The old man spoke like one casting accounts. Again accusations were hurled into the crowd against the Emperor, the mandarins, soldiers. The Truly Powerless were representatives, offspring of the people, had grown from a movement that could arise only at a time of oppression; misfortune was their fate. And here bloomed the White Waterlily. United by the terrorism of the alien rulers, baseness of the mandarins: the Committee in Shantung would have reached the same conclusion. It had been decided that all should stand together and accept the decision of the Committee in Poshan. The land must be freed of the Manchu and the lying, deceiving officials driven out. "The Mings!" called two, three voices from the floor. The old man's face became transfigured: yes, they must prepare again for the time of the Mings. As the Truly Powerless sought the Western Paradise, so friends of the White Waterlily and of Wang Lun must strive for the age of the golden Mings. Sadly he shook his head. Still they would have to wait, until Wang himself arrived, a week, two weeks more. Before then many misfortunes could occur. But Ngo was with them, and it was certain that in Peking itself Imperial troops would come over to them.

The crowd stood stock still. The old man had got down from the steps. "No decisioon?" broke over him. The theatre lights were still burning. The names "Wang Lun" and "Ming" echoed. The mass

became looser. They shoved in droves through the doors, across the bottomless streaming temple yard into an unpopulated side alley, into the rainwashed park that belonged to the temple. Several remained in the storeroom, banged windows tight, curled up on soft bundles and snored.

Wang hastened to a little village near Hochien, inhabited now almost solely by his adherents and friends of the White Waterlily. Barely a week later he stood with eight hundred tolerably well armed soldiers behind the village. Solemn wrath, passionate disputes with his followers had preceded the enlisting of the Truly Powerless as soldiers. The transformation of these most peaceable of men—for none here had been provoked by direct attacks—into a mob of warriors ready to kill and ready to die was achieved with difficulty.

Unopposed by Imperial troops Wang Lun marched on Hochien. And four weeks after Yellow Bell had sought out Ngo, three weeks after the gathering in the pawnshop, Wang threw his troops against the town walls. Gate guards, police were struck down, the occupying troops of the Imperial army first locked in, then driven over the walls with arrows; officials given mercilessly over to the rage of the populace. The great town fell unconditionally to Wang. People rejoiced in the streets. Wang's soldiers had broken in like a pack of wild beasts: vicious under the violation of their souls, now truly vengeful. Victory meant nothing to them; they were spurred on to all their deeds for no further goal than to become peaceable beggars again, quiet artisans and labourers. Chao Hui could breathe again: the smoke was dissipating; now naked, jagged flames were breaking out.

The morning after the seizure of the town Wang Lun and Ngo sat in the yard of the locked magistrate's yamen. They sat in a wooden shed that petitioners had to seek out. The streets were noisy: jubilant shooting, gongbeats in procession. Wang, in a grey dangling unbelted smock, wide straw hat on his head, had one leg over the other. His voice had taken on a hard, bright military tone. When he

laughed, it rattled and croaked breastdeep like the neighing of a horse. His eyes gazed firm, straight ahead, right, left, seeking, controlling; he adopted a highhanded tone that gave the impression he had found a secret way to order, decide, explain. He observed Ngo good-humouredly. “Do you still hold it against me, from back then?” Ngo replied with a black look from under his brows, smoothed his simple gown: “All past, Wang.” “You had cause, Ngo. It was a cold bath for me, what you brought me about Ma No. Couldn’t take it too well at first.” And then Wang gave such a loud, free, uninhibited yelp that Ngo was reminded of his laughter with the slut under the gate. “Belter skelter down the hill, through the snow, Yellow Leaper in the thick of it, had his fill. Nearly took my hand off. Ngo, what times they were!”

“Yes, yes, fine times. Wang, I’ve not changed much since those splendid times.”

“A thousand li, Lower Reaches, cormorant fishing calm a man down. Hey, what’s up, Ngo?”

“Sorrow, Wang.”

“I can see that.”

“So.”

“Are you reproaching me?”

“Not at all, Wang. I can’t keep pace with the times.”

“My soldiers have a better grip on them. Bow to hand, arrow in, let it fly. In between, just one thought: hit the mark! Anyone who thinks differently is no use to me, he’s too good for me.”

“The Lower Reaches did you good. I envy you.”

Wang sprang up, pulled Ngo up by the hands. “Ngo, careful now. Take care, think twice, answer. When I lead my Truly Powerless into this—raising bows, aiming, shooting, always hitting the mark, am I doing right or wrong? Think twice, Ngo.”

Ngo slowly shook his head. “Let go of my hands. I’m happy you’re here.”

“That’s all very well. But—who are you? What am I to make of you?”

“Let’s sit down. I haven’t come as far as you. I’d rather have gone

with Ma No to the Mongolian town and drunk your poison. Then I could have stayed where I was and wanted to be. They were the flower of your league, Wang, believe me, those who fell in the Mongolian town. Yellow Bell's taken another road, you've taken another road, so have many others. I can't follow you. I stick by you and forgive you Ma No's tragedy. But what's coming now I don't understand and can't be a part of. I am a Truly Powerless, want to model myself on the Tao, stop struggling against fate, against the knocks that buffet me. I rode a horse before I came to you in the Nank'ou mountains, shot, swung a lance, a sword. What I suffered then and because I suffered so then, I sneaked away from horses and weapons and made my bed on your good teachings, teachings that are still so good. Being free, staying free, what can happen to me, what boy, what hopeless desire could torment me! You can hear it in my prattling: you didn't deceive us. Our souls didn't grub after riches, long life. Misfortune lit on us with a sigh; doorcreeping Misfortune, that adored, abused child, found a home with us. Wang Lun, the Lower Reaches can't have taken all that from you. The rivers and the sea are so wild; the Great Dyke can't hold firm; but they can't have torn from you what is most certain, most immutable. I myself, Wang, helped with half a heart to prepare what has now come to pass. Yellow Bell told me: a sick man clings to the first thing he sees. But I know better now: it would have been better if we'd all fallen like the hundreds Chao Hui has already killed. That would be ten times, a thousand, countless times better, believe me, Wang Lun, please believe me, than for you to enter the city, slaughter, at best found a new kingdom that must soon become as bad as any other."

Ngo, his expression calm, regarded Wang from forlorn convinced eyes.

The swarthy man was unmoved. "It's good, Ngo, that you've spoken to me like this. I'll give you an answer. A lot of my soldiers have said the same thing to me."

"Yes, answer, tell me. You'll heal me if you speak like you did to the beggars in the Nank'ou mountains. After all you haven't changed, it makes me calm to see it, the same old Wang Lun on

whom all build, I built and still build."

Wang sprang up, sat again only when he started speaking. His voice was hard, relentless: "You know the Emperor issued an edict to have us exterminated. Who is the Emperor? What is it, this 'emperor'? I know lightning, men killed by rivers, on the water, beneath beech trees; you can be crushed by a landslide, there are floods, fires, wild beasts, snakes. And demons. They can kill any of us. There's little enough protection from them. What is this 'emperor'? What is it founded on, this outrageous, shameless presumption of the Emperor to have us all killed? He's a man like you, me, the soldiers. Because his ancestor, the dead man from Manchuria, marched in and conquered the Ming empire, the Emperor Ch'ien-lung has the right to slaughter the Truly Powerless and me. Does his ancestor's deed put him on a level with floods, landslides, thunderbolts? You need to demonstrate the fact, Ngo. Until you can refute poor dead Chu, who saw emperors as intruders and mass murderers, I assert that they are the fate of the Broken Melon and the Truly Powerless. I'm not going to take poison of my own accord. I'll send them packing to where they belong. Our league lives on soil that belongs to us."

"This is new, I've not heard this from you before, Wang. I don't know if I can cope with it."

"You'd better, and fast, dear brother."

Ever more astonished, Ngo: "Quite right, quite right. What should I do? These are things I've said myself—to others."

Wang raised his hands. "So we agree."

Ngo, shifting, his voice unsure: "What does that mean, Wang—we agree? What are we agreed on?"

"What do you want of me? Why must you press me so? Do I owe you something? Have I stolen something from you? The Emperor's an intruder, so Chu said; you have to come to terms with it, Ngo. There's nothing more to say."

Ngo rolled up his eyes; Wang's gaze wandered over the empty yard. They were silent. Wang clapped his knee. "The others came to terms with it."

An eternity of silent waiting and glances. When a procession gonged past the yamen and Ngo, jumping at every drumbeat, looked towards the door Wang stamped to his feet in disgust, walked up and down in the plank shed, his face suddenly suffused with anger, planted himself in front of Ngo, rested one knee on the bench.

"I don't give a damn. You choose your own way. I don't want to see anyone who has no faith in me. You for sure I don't need; one less makes no difference. Forcing me to—Idon'tknoow what."

Gaunt Ngo got wearily to his feet. Clear face, clear voice: "I'm going now, Wang."

"Just what I mean. Wants to force me. But no faith. Not a trace of faith. What didn't I give you all. I made you invincible, resccued you from—. And when I come at last nothing but white walls, planks. Questions, why why, why? It's not enough for me to come and say such and such and such. It's all to be paid for in ready cash, accounted for on five sides so nothing goes astray. Hah, I've got your measure, haven't I?"

"I don't know who you're talking to."

"To Ngo."

"Wang, I'm loyal to you. I ask because I am no insensate wall. I can't go into this battle; I've fled from it. You gave me a few years of peace. Thousands are dead because they didn't want to go back and now here you come, want to throttle me, one of those still alive, and I'm not even supposed to ask a favour of you."

"Favours, questions. Just let me hear one more 'why'! You roused me to a fury once. Just keep on talking. Yesterday I took this town; we've been skirmishing these past few days. You were supposed to be easy on me. I say the Emperor's an intruder. The Emperor Ch'ien-lung has no right to issue edicts against us. You have to understand that. He's a hangman, he's not fate. There's nothing there to check over."

"I'm not checking anything over any more, Wang, excuse me, I'm still loyal to you."

"You're still checking me over, you! You always doublecheck everything. I'm telling you everything so you know it too. That's all.

Now get this through your head:

"It—was—not—granted—to—us to be Truly Powerless. It—was—not—granted to us. Now I'm going to squeeze myself dry for you.

"Five times I dreamed about the Mongolian town. Then I realized. Yes, you'd better hear it all, just listen, don't butt in. That's why I fled to the Lower Reaches, that's why I ridiculed you, kicked you out. I was wrong in the Nank'ou mountains. Fate strikes at us with its hoof wherever we appear. A Truly Powerless can only be a suicide. And they were, and I saw it in the Mongolian town and the Emperor's generals saw it too. And that's stupid, Ngo, and I can't bear to see it, and that's why I've come back, because I'm to blame and it can't go on like this for ever. Everyone must be struck down, and all at once, and I with them in one heap. Yes, the Mongolian town was better, and that's the way it must be for us, only worse."

On unsteady legs Ngo approached Wang, who spewed his words out at the wall of the shed, froth on his white lips, and touched his dangling arm. "But it can't be true, Wang Lun, it can't be true."

When Wang uttered a moan, Ngo let go his arm. Wang flung down his straw hat, sank back onto the bench, groaned. "It's a shame, it's a filthy shame."

He rubbed the back of his skull against the planks. His pinched rigid face stared straight ahead. "Go. I don't want to know about you, Ngo. Don't make me lose patience. Run away, Ngo, run away. I'm afraid for you, I beg you. Get away from here fast."

Ngo, confused, swayed on the wooden door like an automaton.

As the door slammed shut behind him Wang's fists drummed against the woodwork. Blood pounded through the claws that ripped loose the bench on which he had been sitting, splintered and scattered it. He set bitterly to work on the flimsy hut, raged across the sunbright yard. "Villains, they're villains here, scoundrels, assassins! I've fallen into a snakepit." Ran his back, knees hard against the tottering, creaking structure. "Why don't I kill myself?"

Two hours later smoke wafted from the yamen windows; the two front buildings screeched, scolded, howled mouthfuls of flame. When they were about to break down the door it moved, opened from

inside. Wang Lun rasped through the gap; sick bellicose glances: the yamen was to bum down, they'd better look to the neighbouring buildings.

That evening a council of war convened in the Town God's temple. Thirty men attended, twenty captains of the existing forces and ten from the town, representing guilds. Ngo appeared, invited at Wang Lun's wish. The discussion, which lasted into the night, concerned the organizing of the young men of the town and how to arm them. Here for the first time proposals were aired for making Wang king. Wang Lun's plan—to prepare for a direct assault on Peking after joining up with renegade Guards—was approved. A proclamation was to be issued: the Dragon Throne was to be regained for the Ming Dynasty.

At noon next day, after the troops had finished their drill and wrestling practice, Ngo approached quickstriding Wang, who was wiping sweat. They walked through muddy side alleys towards the centre of the town.

The former officer's delicate face vibrated, became a shade paler: "I shan't beat about the bush. I have to ask your pardon."

Wang, fingers dismissive, not looking: "Work, Ngo, don't talk."

"It has to happen. I've considered the whole matter, Wang."

"About the Emperor?"

"About the Emperor too. I'll stay by you. I shall ride to Peking with you. Who is to become king?"

"What do you mean? Perhaps you, or—yes, a Ming prince from the southern provinces."

"Not you. Well then, that's all right, Wang. I'll stay with you. We'll leave bygones alone."

Wang cast a suspicious sidelong glance. "You'll ride with us?" "You think my tone a little flat, you mean. That'll pass. I have a great desire to ride with you. To the northwest, Peking. We'll break through the walls off the Vermilion City. I have a good idea of all the things we'll need. Houses, walls, gardens, palaces—we'll destroy them all. I hope nothing remains of the Vermilion City."

"Destroy it all?"

Ngo, passionately: “I can’t ride with you unless you’re going to raze the Vermilion City, Wang. It must be razed; I’ll ride willingly for that.”

“Well, well, as you like. It makes no difference. A few houses make no difference.”

They turned a corner, stood in the marketplace in front of a little house which Wang had taken for his quarters. Wang narrowed his eyes, considering, then invited Ngo in. A woman came awkwardly forward. The two men sat in a smoky room on the mat, slurped tea.

Wang after a pause, immersed in thought: “I’m still alive, as you see. The yamen burned down.”

“Let’s not speak of that.”

“Life turns like a millwheel. You never know which side you’ve got hold of. Now once again I’m—not burned.”

Ngo very softly: “It’s like that for all of us.”

“You can sob, rage, roar, if only you know where you are. Anyone could kill me and I wouldn’t know if he was right or wrong.”

“I’m not to blame for that, Wang.”

“What are they doing now, in the Lower Reaches? My wife, back with her family. She’ll know my name by now, won’t grieve much for me. That’s a blessing. But there’s something else in the Lower Reaches that comes years later and tells me I must return, because something in me is not yet ready. Always there are clouds somewhere, water, something undefined that years later remembers and wants me to return.”

“Wang, did someone fetch you back?”

“It’s all the same. I’ve come back. The position of the millwheel. Ma No hadn’t finished the business. Oh how I envied that man. He wasn’t a priest; he was much braver than me, though he never touched a sword. He did it all so quickly while I was running, seeking help, rousing up the White Waterlily. Shut up his band, suffered what I knew they would; then made the leap, founded his kingdom. It’s all happened already.”

“We shall all perish and gain our Western Home.”

“I’d like to go once more to Nank’ou or to Chinan-fu and

remember."

Wang darted a glance at Ngo. "Or should I really try it? Who can tell beforehand what's possible? Fish jump high and a moment later suffocate in the net. Perhaps Ma No wasn't good-we have to bear arms, have horses, cities."

"Yes, well, you're right, Wang. Clouds and water are bad luck. We need hopes."

Wang's upper lip curled grimly. "It's enemies I need, Ngo, must have. I'm not yet choking in a net. I won't give the Emperor that pleasure. The Emperor's the enemy. You don't chase after the Western Paradise like going to the theatre. I thought too lightly of it. Our Western Home lies in the K'unlun mountains behind crags and ice, up above all clouds and water."

"Yes, that's all good."

Laughter pulsed nearer beneath Wang's voice. "The Western Paradise lies beyond Peking. We're so many, that was our misfortune. If it was you and me and ten others nothing would have happened to us. We were thousands, and thousands are already dead, and the Emperor's frightened of every shadow. Thousands from his provinces congregating, wanting to join the Wu-wei—that gnaws at his spleen. And it dines on my heart."

He let out a mocking, ringing snort of laughter. Cheerfully he poked wistful Ngo's cheeks, hot under helpless eyes, sang out fullthroated through the house.

In the battles that followed the adherents of Wu-wei were swiftly decimated. These Truly Powerless were the boldest soldiers, unable to resist their thirst for death. In the midst of battle Wang struck down the fainthearted. They fertilized the ground for the holy kingdom.

Wang did not swerve. With cold assurance he proceeded. Except that on some days, when he seemed to slacken, he turned away bands of recruits without a reason, only to rescind the order later. A girl who saved his life near one village, by alerting him to a peasant who was aiming an arrow at him through a window, he kept at his side as the campaign advanced. No one knew if she was his lover.

The pleasant, not exactly pretty country girl had a naive trustingness. Wang seemed surer of himself when she was near. This sentimentality aroused comment, but Wang explained several times that he had to do something for himself to get through the next few months; she was his amulet. But some were soon claiming he'd fallen for her. In those weeks no one knew rightly how to approach him: the wind blew now from this, now from that quarter.

Six thousand men pulled out from Hochien under Wang's command, horsemen and foot soldiers. And as they marched, hailed by peasants in the fields, northeast against a powerful division of Chao Hui's forces they were joined by great streams from south and north.

Wang Lun swung his hands in delight: "They're coming like rats out of their holes," as distant drumbeats drew near; "I spilled a glass of wine. Now every drop's coming back to me. I've a great scaly dragon-body stretching a hundred li behind me. Until I find my nice warm cave!"

The daring of their attack on Paoting was unprecedented. Hundreds of women, mostly sisters, mingled in the battle, shot arrows, urged on, threw burning brands, upturned pails of boiling oil. They ran with great black banners bearing the sign of the Ming up over trenches and defensive works. The Imperials had to throttle them, tear them loose limb by limb like lizards. As soon as hand-to-hand fighting started the battle was decided, the troops of Ili met their match. The fury was horrible to behold. The Truly Powerless fought like demons; their brutish appearance, faces made up like cats or tigers aroused horror. When the village to the rear of the Imperials suddenly billowed smoke, though no enemy detachment had been observed behind the lines, and shrill cries of women from the village rushed closer, the Imperials were crushed between two millstones and all but a few torn to pieces by cats, tigers and women.

At the feast after the battle, instead of songs there were roars and roars of laughter. Men imitated the womens' screeching, the women screamed, cooked and ate the livers of brothers and enemies, to

ingest their courage.

This human wave surged from the ground intent on rolling towards Peking. The core of Chao Hui's forces lay north of the capital; it was no longer possible to bring them up before the Truly Powerless arrived. The Northern Residence had to rely on its Banner troops. Ch'ien-lung had sent emissaries to Chao Hui, to the Tsungtu of Chihli. These, unsuspecting, were intercepted by rebels, some of whom had not attached themselves to Wang's main body, but on advice from the leaders of the approaching army acted independently to unsettle the northwest and northeast. The war differed in no respect from earlier rebellions. Each side outdid the other in atrocities; only the speed of the revolutionary advance, and the circumstance that everywhere the authorities were the first to be slaughtered, were in some degree noteworthy.

The crucial link between the rebel army and the secretly rebellious Guards at Peking was forged by Ngo. The council of war had in fact urged that Wang should exercise his incomparable skills in this matter, but after some hesitation Wang declined. There was in general something subdued and dull in his manner, apparent only to those close to him, which confused some of the guild leaders. They could not understand why Wang, a look of gloomy boredom on his face, sometimes turned his back on the exercising troops, handed command to one of the designated officers, and withdrew nervily with some others to a tent to smoke a waterpipe. He told his friends in endless yearning repetition about Ma No, what heights he'd risen to, a Truly Powerless to the very end. He kept to himself the certain fact that Ma had been killed by a common soldier, and stressed how quickly Death had carried them all away. Which of the Truly Powerless, he wondered, would now have the courage to endure what the brothers of the Broken Melon had endured. How incomprehensible, how admirable was Ma No's certainty, right to the end. In such a vein Wang spoke often. And then he smoked his pipe dreamily. His little sweetheart had to play the lute to him, or sit there gawping at him. He wouldn't allow her to be sent away; to the discomfiture of the leaders, Wang would even on a whim summon

her in the middle of a council of war into the tent or house and have her sit there across from him.

Ngo's discussion with Yellow Bell took place unremarked near Peking, at the lovely tomb of the Fo-shou0 Princess, on the Canal. Ngo and the officer promenaded innocently among the people between the white trunks of spruce trees. When the avenue reached the marble beasts and statues of the Princess' mausoleum, they turned back.

Yellow Bell had not expected the speed and extent of the rebels' success, but everything had been prepared by him both within and outside the Vermilion City. Eagerly he besought a meeting with Wang Lun. Ngo felt again the enormous uncomplicated certainty that streamed from the officer, its rays seeming more direct even than those from Wang.

From Yellow Bell's report Ngo discovered with what address he had made use of people. The opening of the two western gates into the Forbidden City had been a difficult task: the officers commanding the watch, both collateral relatives of the Imperial line, could not possibly be taken into the revolutionaries' confidence. Yellow Bell had used their fondness for women to bring them both down.

For an extraordinarily clever and beautiful young lady, from the house of a judge to whom he was related, had become close to him. The still unbetrothed girl, in a most uncustomary manner, had letters and books delivered by her maidservants to the taciturn, always grave officer; on excursions with her maids she managed, though otherwise cultivating the utmost reserve, to have her sedan chair come into the neighbourhood of Yellow Bell's yamen, which did not escape his notice. The young lady, granddaughter of the judge, had been raised by him after the death of her parents in the strictest propriety, trained to an icy coolness. Since the lonely official wished to keep his granddaughter at his side to care for him, he had instilled in her from the start a deep aversion to young men. He had her carefully educated but kept apart from those of her own age, so that as she bloomed to a distinctive beauty only the servants

of the household and five or six ladies and gentlemen were acquainted with her. She smiled conceitedly when she played with her dolls and pets, lived entirely in music, books, in respect for her grandfather.

Yellow Bell, invited often to the old judge's house and meeting her there, unsettled her. There ensued a more intensive occupation with dolls, a passionate absorption in philosophical works. She often thanked her grandfather unprompted for bringing her up so well. Her inclination towards solitude and lengthy excursions changed; she took her unconcealed pride on outings, looked from behind the veils and screens of her sedan chair at other ladies and felt a mixture of disgust, hatred and scorn. She admired herself in a little silver mirror left by her mother, regarded herself with delight and febrile excitement; she stroked her hair, kissed herself in the mirror, courted herself, yielded, rejected herself. She acted out reunions, partings before the mirror, breaking out in such violent sobbing that her maids told the judge, to whom she explained that she was mourning for her late mother who sometimes appeared to her. The old man shook his head at this, spoke of an absurd female whimsy and charged the maids to take her out frequently in boats, into the country, to the theatre.

Most unwillingly she let herself be drawn into such liveliness; but the excursions soon transformed her into such an entertaining creature that the maids were able to make the happiest reports of her to the judge. The young lady practised her sharp tongue: she mocked everyone and everything in such a way that her companions had to laugh. It was strange how acutely the girl noted her maids' coarse turns of phrase, how on their walks she observed and absorbed the earthy language of the common people, interlarded her cruel witty conversation with such handy vulgar crudities. In her grandfather's presence she concealed such things or defended an expression that happened to slip out, so that he stroked his beard and laughed. Returning home from these excursions she kissed herself smugly and with warmth in the mirror; but then she mocked herself, scolded furiously, pondered deeply how curious people could

be. She sat musing half an hour at a time and now suddenly really did mourn her mother, who must have been a quiet, good woman. She felt an urge to know something of the long-dead woman. She made some enquiries of her grandfather, but when he answered only with disparaging banalities she bothered him no more with it, but was offended and in secret honoured her mother all the more reverently. Under this feeling she moderated her behaviour, was condescendingly humorous on her outings, cradled herself in elegaic and pathetic sentiments.

About this time Yellow Bell was a frequent guest at the judge's residence. With a slight mistrust the girl occasionally engaged in conversation with him. He did not speak much, always with refined courtesy. He took little notice of the young lady; for lovely Liang-li from Chengting was dead, and he was bereft.

Then the girl stormed in on the judge one day after a visit, asked him in future not to invite Yellow Bell, he had behaved shamelessly to her. To the astonished mandarin's queries as to where, when, how, she replied: just now, by his whole manner. The man was only pretending to be sad and stem; he was cunning, she knew enough about men to see that; he was trying to represent himself by his manner in a certain light; she found his attitude impudent and would see him no more. The mandarin dismissed her complaints with vigour, but inwardly he was delighted to see his granddaughter so averse to men, and invited Yellow Bell only when the girl was not present.

But when she observed her success she found that her resentment of Yellow Bell did not evaporate. In conversation with her maids she made it seem that he had fled from her—for a reason which she did not reveal; she came on the idea during their outings of pestering him, snaring him, taking it out on him. The idea of ensnaring him was particularly vivid in her mind: she imagined Yellow Bell as an eel that she grabbed by the head and dragged quickly over boggy ground. She explained once that the officer had insulted her mother; they must believe her; she hated him for it.

The manifold girlish and often spiteful tricks that Yellow Bell now

had to endure from her did little to disturb him. He wouldn't have believed the old mandarin could have been so lax with his granddaughter's education. Only when the barbs revealed some sharpness, he began to receive books about prescribed social conduct, and he noticed at the same time that the young lady was no longer present during his visits did he grow more thoughtful. This was the time when he first discussed with Ngo the beginning of the rebellion and was taking measures in the district around the capital.

The tricks this strange girl played charmed and diverted him. He couldn't deny that in the midst of his dangerous preparations he followed her games with a certain interest. Unmarried and belonging to no Peking clan he took his meals in various places, in restaurants in the city, when the weather was fine on the flowerboats, at the homes of friendly officers. The crowds in public eating places, the playful and suggestive conversation of serving girls repelled him.

One day he noticed in an elegant restaurant an unusual liveliness among the guests, their bright laughter and chatter, saw three new waitresses, recognized to his horror the young granddaughter of the judge, who had been quiet for some weeks, and her two companions. She pretended not to see him, did not serve him, and then, darting forward from the swarm of flirting gentlemen, asked brusquely what he wanted, her wild glance passing over his head. He ordered his wine; she despatched a waitress with kettle and cup, continued flirting as skillfully as if she enjoyed the company of young gallants every day, then suddenly took her leave of the surprised guests, to whom the host explained that she only came now and then to help out.

Yellow Bell, gloomier than usual, returned there at noon on the following two days. On the second day he sat alone in a secluded corner of the restaurant. She flounced up. He ordered wine for himself and a lady. She stood stiffly at the table, bent down towards him, asked again, "A lady?" Then half fainting, her eyes extinguished, "Poo, poo." And wanted to run to her chair, go home to vomit up her rage and shame, smash her mirror and cast herself

penitent at her grandfather's feet. But Yellow Bell held the sleeve of her green overgown. She trembled, cried; with beseeching whimpers, begging him not to do anything, sank onto the bench beside him where he spoke gently and amiably to her for a long time. Her carefully made-up face lay on the wooden winestained table top.

At last she left, dragging herself away painfully, broken, her face slack and empty.

The officer did not meet her again in the restaurant. Several visits to the judge's residence were in vain: she did not appear. That he felt moved by this capricious little creature oppressed him. The secret preparations for war pushed everything else to the background.

And when he was occupied with the most difficult task of winning over new officers, she appeared on the scene with mocking little letters. He suppressed his first annoyance at this unexpected approach. When her sedan chair appeared in the neighbourhood of the yamen he rode to meet it, walked dismounted beside the girl, conversing while she lolled joking and laughing on her cushions, at the same time watching him sharply. Yellow Bell finally poked his head around the red curtain, whispered gazing earnestly at the shrinking girl that he absolutely had to speak to her, at once; he needed her help; it was a matter of the utmost importance to him.

At the clandestine visit that she made at nightfall to his yamen in the company of her maids, without beating about the bush he explained his revolutionary plans, showed his sketch maps, the plan of action. The girl, attending with great seriousness, asked practical questions. He revealed to her the difficulty of entering the Vermilion City through the western gates, yet they could only enter through these gates, for entry by the eastern or southern gates would necessitate surrounding the entire Forbidden City, thereby splitting up their not too numerous forces. Coming to the two officers of the watch he carefully described their idiosyncracies, the impossibility of initiating them into the plot; noted in passing what vain fellows they were, womanisers of the worst sort. The girl, considering, soon smiled; the smile spread to him, and so both broke out into cheerful

laughter, she roaring, he softly under constraint.

But then there was a long pause while she sat on her chair with streaming eyes, did not answer and asked only that she be allowed to sit there. The officer paced from wall to table, from table to wall, cursed himself for his clumsiness, resolutely swept up the papers, explained to her softly that he didn't want to upset her, none of this had been said. The girl stood up gravely, rejected such a misprision of her understandable fatigue; she felt immensely honoured to receive his confidence, of which she hoped to prove worthy; asked calmly now about details, about the Truly Powerless, Wang Lun, said she wanted to hatch a plan tomorrow, and left the uneasy officer, who felt he couldn't cope, alone.

And the next day he came across her sedan chair again. She was resplendent in a rich blue gown embroidered with pheasants. Ribbons of green silk hung from her shoulders and her waist; black hair was piled like a helmet on her clever head. Her eyes looked trustingly at him; she wanted to prove to him that she was capable of more than writing cynical letters. As it turned out, she succeeded in just a few days in attracting the delighted interest of both officers. To one she was a dancing girl, to the other an abandoned wife. The young lady held both besotted men in the palm of her hand.

Once Ngo had been informed by Yellow Bell of the state of the preparations, plans had been exchanged for the joint occupation of Peking, they ceased their promenades between the spruces by the gleaming mausoleum. Couriers summoned Ngo to return. The armies of the Truly Powerless and the White Waterlily mobilized.

Scorching heat in the northern provinces as the revenge-swollen rebel masses rolled towards Peking. The drought spread horror. On the way they encountered processions of peasants heading out from their villages into open country to pray for rain. In front of the little peasant bands a man ran with a green helmet thrust down over his head, a green wooden shield on his back. Now and then everyone halted in grey powdery fields. The costumed man, representing the rain god, supported himself as if ill on two bendy staffs like the antennae of a snail. And now the furious villagers fell on him,

sprinkled him with water from cans hanging from yokes, beat on his shield with flails and pitchforks. Several of these peasant bands joined the insurrection direct from their processions, holding the Emperor to blame for the severe drought.

Channels snaked like empty intestines, dry putrid grooves through the landscape. Leaves curled on the trees, hung brown and sere over crumbling fields, steam rose from brooks like soup in which dying fish threshed, mouths and gills jammed.

The hotplate of the fields thudded beneath soldiers' feet. Brightly clad swarms hastened wilting across dead plains. Before them swept black accusing banners. The caloric element overtook them: all around houses went up in flames. Soldiers lay down exhausted south of the little river Liang-shui near Peking. They filled the wonderful monastery of Chieht'ai-szu across the Hun-ho, the Yellow Lord's favourite resort, bawled over the red walls towards Peking, sought shade among the oaks and privets of the old hunting park.

Chao Hui advanced by forced marches. Only a fraction of his forces made headway; no provisions to be had, roads barricaded with boulders, gangs of rebels at their rear and on their flanks every day.

On the day when Wang Lun's victorious troops stormed the walls of Peking's southern city, Ch'ien-lung sat in conversation with Chia-ch'ing in the Ch'ien-ch'ing Kung, the Emperor's private palace in the Forbidden City, and silently listened to the uncanny music of roars and screams from the Chinese quarter.

Ch'ien-lung, grown thin, rather bent, in a yellow gown on cushions at the open window: "When the Tashi-lama advised me to tolerate the sects, exercise mercy, I didn't know if I would be doing right in the eyes of my ancestors. When the ministers and censors were assembled and the princes of the first rank stood at my side, we composed the edict that was to dismember the sects."

Chia-ch'ing, looking at the floor, murmured, "It's all right. We have good walls. Chao Hui will be here soon."

"I hear screams from across the walls. There must be righteousness, Chia-ch'ing. My life is of no importance. I must be

righteous. Might it be better to surrender?"

"If I might beseech my father not to torment himself all the time with oppressive thoughts."

"I am quite calm, Chia-ch'ing. But we shall talk it over just once; you'll learn something from it."

"My father always sacrificed to Heaven at the proper times, emulated his great ancestors, burned incense to them on the prescribed days; the populace has flourished."

"The populace has not flourished. My people are no longer peaceable, for they are not happy. See the flames there, to the north of the Temple of Agriculture: so horribly do they sacrifice to me. Love my people—?"

"What you have done for the people is so tremendous, so unprecedented, that I couldn't be so bold as to compare with yours any reign that will follow."

"Words, Chia-ch'ing, words. The populace thinks otherwise. I've lost face. My time is up."

"The murderer Wang Lun wants to restore the Ming. The Ming!"

"How ridiculous. You shall reign after me. I ask only whether it's sufficient to the moment for me to—to retire?"

"Father, I beseech you. How can I reign after you, I who am without merit, without spirit, without literary skill, incapable of drawing a bow, mounting a horse—after you, and you say you've not done enough."

"What a noise the Chinese make."

"It sounds like rejoicing. That's cannonfire. There—rockets."

"To give us light, Chia-ch'ing. A strange people. No brain."

"Let me close the window, father, draw the curtains."

"Leave it, it doesn't bother me. It's instructive. Let us experience this moment together. We don't often have the chance to look so closely into men's faces. The Mings won't return, those—those fools. Emperors can't be warmed up again. How good, ten parts good, that the Pure Dynasty came in with the Manchus. You people must be ruled with iron. There's no freedom for this race. Only love, that marches through the streets with a curved sabre at its belt."

Ch'ien-lung stood at the window, menacing with his fist. Chia-ch'ing rose. After a pause, Chia-ch'ing: "A-kuei's holding the Tartar City. Our walls and ramparts are well manned."

"I know you mean they are not well manned. They're enough for those there."

"Perhaps it would be better, father, to deploy more of our Manchurian Banner troops, bowmen from Kirin into the Vermillion City. There are rumours that some of the other Banner regiments are not reliable."

"All our Banners are good. Where have you heard such rumours?"

"I couldn't obtain any hard information. My servant gave me a suspicious wax tablet with secret markings, picked up in a barracks. I made enquiries, and found that there was already talk of such things."

Ch'ien-lung glared at him. "Talk. Suspicious wax tablet. Bannermen's barracks. My eunuchs should keep their eyes open. Old wives' tales, nothing more."

"Nevertheless, it's unsettling—"

"So I see. It's unsettling you."

"The princesses and other princes have heard these rumours. If we become afraid—"

"That's your affair, Chia-ch'ing. Princesses don't concern themselves with the defence of the Forbidden City. The dynasty rests on my shoulders."

Slammed the window to. "Draw the curtains, Chia-ch'ing. Heat's pouring in. The noise is tiresome. Tell me about your peacocks."

Chia-ch'ing looked enquiringly at him.

"How many do you have now? Has your keeper managed to obtain breeding birds for you from the King of Turfan? I have six rare ones."

Chia-ch'ing remained silent. The Emperor, now sitting upright against the cushions, declaimed equably, "Aren't you interested in peafowl? Not anymore? That's not right. Animals and books are both good: they don't change. They'll soon stop shooting, outside. Great movements peter out quickest. It's a fine movement, this Ming

rebellion. Don't fret about it, Chia-ch'ing."

The old ruler walked somewhat stiff kneed up and down the room. At a table covered with scrolls and books he picked up a book, leafed through it; the lines on his forehead settled; his crumpled face assumed an expression of deep absorption.

Reading he sat down again at the window. "Yes, so it is. How good that there are books I've written myself. I can compare, seek, find myself. I should like to go to Mukden. How lovely it is there. I described it the way a young man enumerates the delights of his beloved: the hills, the forests, the innumerable fish in the rivers, the Taling-ho. Hunts. Did T'ai-tsung not say: 'Let us go to war! That is the only recreation for the Manchus. Our hills bring forth a new kind of enemy. Hunting must be for us the image of war.' " He read on. Chia-ch'ing rose quietly, felt his way to the door. Ch'ien-lung called to him, smiled: "Stay with the old man. He might be able to calm you. Don't go to the women, or you'll lose your composure." Chia-ch'ing cowered. The Emperor regarded him with a smile.

While Chia-ch'ing sat with the Emperor and in vain sought once more to persuade him to bring a strong force of Guards into the Forbidden City, was brushed coldly and mockingly aside by Ch'ien-lung, disorder reigned among the palaces. An unwonted jumble of eunuchs and soldiers heaved about by the walls. The eunuchs counted the soldiers, stopped their ears at every new cry of triumph from the burning Chinese city, ran to the interior of the City to report to the nervous women and dignitaries who had taken shelter there. Many of the obese eunuchs sat side by side, hearts pounding, heavily armed with helmets, swords, shields. Several ancient dignitaries carried silken cords or fine gold leaf, to give themselves an easy death. Here and there a cheerful soldier wandered about with a live chicken under his arm, showed the cackling bird to the running eunuchs with a comforting exhortation not to worry; he'd sacrifice with comb's blood from this three year old bird to fortify their souls on the journey to the grave. What would they pay him in advance? Towards evening, before darkness set in, Ch'ien-lung was carried along the walls of the Forbidden City. For an hour he

inspected as squads were deployed and sentries posted. He moved in a terrible stillness. Chia-ch'ing had been summoned to the Emperor for the night. Almost weeping and beside himself, the prince besought him with the utmost urgency to order more troops into the city. Ch'ien-lung lost patience and remarked that one should not hide from fate when it came in search of the Pure Dynasty. Did the Prince doubt that the Ming dreamers would—must—crack their heads against a wall? And then he tormented Chia-ch'ing by counting off the troops, who were so few.

As expected, in the middle of the night the rebels unleashed their attack on the Tartar City and Vermilion City. No order was discernible in this assault; Simultaneously with it war whoops echoed outside the two northern gates, the Tesheng and Anting Gates, and outside the three southern gates: Shunchih Men, Hata Men, and the Ch'ien Men that led onto the great Imperial avenue. The rebel storm was of extraordinary ferocity. Breaking of gates, defeat and expulsion of the guards took but a short time. After the initial falling back of Manchu troops there followed stubborn and bitter resistance in streets, barracks. Overwhelming, engulfing, the rebel swarms poured over heaps of the fallen through the wide open gates of the southern city. They mingled with traders and merchants from the Chinese quarter, who were quick to follow the victorious Ming banner.

The shortlegged awkward-shouldered Manchu troops fought the huge peasants from the northern plain, who craved revenge for the drought, climbed coolly through barrack windows with whetted blades, hissing flails, were shot dead from somewhere. Scattered groups of brothers and sisters spat out Death, gulped it down.

The dazzling white-red of the sea of fire in the east of the Tartar City injected a swathe of brightnesses and deep shadows into the scene. The new granary in the north burst into flame. The immense rice store to the south was impregnated by this shower of sparks and within minutes blossomed into a giant poppy tossing flaming in the wind. Under the festive lights threshing masses burrowed into each other. Grotesque squirming, contortions, armswinging, hopping of

silhouettes, ghostly running across shadowed barrack squares and alleys. Whizzing, splitting, crackling in overheated air from every side, sprinkling over the conventional noises of the question and answer game between death and human life.

For more than a double hour they fought, then Manchus and rebels rolled into the stinking northern ditches outside the Forbidden City, which waited black as pitch and motionless behind its walls.

The dismissive obstinacy in which it lay was dispelled when cannonshot cracked from the upper North Gate and the harsh glare no longer illuminated the tops of the thuyas and cypresses, but after minutes of silence this glow crawled over the ground between torn trunks, wandered dense, intimate between the greenhouses in the northern flower garden. The rebels had broken through the upper North Gate. They poured their twisted grimaces, the stink of ditches and alleys into the stern. city of emperors.

Here the reliable Guards in squares grew grim. Empty women's pavilions trembled at the footfall of the enemy destroyers. The little eastern treasurehouse was broken open; bars of silver, chests, silks gushed down the steps, vases shattered their swelling bellies.

Wedged between the north wall and a crosswall that protected the Imperial residence, the opposing armies sank their teeth into one another. No one could force a way from the burning Tartar city into the tightly packed space. Battlecrazed women suffocated in the gateway.

Wang Lun in the van ripped gaping holes in the Guard. He groaned, heaving his long sword about him. He toiled almost naked, semiconscious, no feeling in arms that lifted and hammered automatically. Now and again he sprang back, stood with head sunk forwards, streaming sweat, motionless as a bronze ox in a human wave that he divided, bloodshot eyes, hands thick as if gloved, his face swollen under a mask of clay. Then the hinges of his iron knee bent, shoulders and elbows parted the mob. Yellow Leaper flashed, pounded blood with blood in the mortar of the Imperial flower garden.

Ngo, drenched in blood not far from him, mined with his short

double-edged sword, splintered projecting lances. He opened chink after chink in the soft living wall that spouted bodies.

From the palace walls arrows, slender butterflies, fluttered over the rebels, lit on gaping cheeks, shoulders, throats, decorated the lurching, the vacantly grinning.

While in the Tartar city throats bayed across broad squares, between the two walls a harsh cry rose only occasionally. In this darkness rent by little light a machine snorted, rattled, stamped. Teeth ground. The Guard squares dissolved. The entrance to the Forbidden City would soon be clear. A whimpering set up among the defenders. Then the Imperial troops fled to either side, the rain of arrows from the wall ceased. From the inner city with a crash of thunder a fresh regiment swept through the gate, speared into the billowing rebel horde, which burst.

Abruptly the jubilation in the Tartar city fell back before the piercing whistles of Manchu cavalry, the bow-wielding clatter of horses. Tenthousandfold cries of woe and rage between the two walls. Panting step by step back behind pyramids of corpses. The upper North Gate compressed the fleeing rebels and mashed them. The Imperial City vomited out the rebels. The ditches rolled them head over heels to the bottom. Shoved into the Tartar city, they were given over to the hooves of brown horses. Squeezed from both sides, death cries trumpeted heavenwards. Curved Manchu sabres macerated brows and backs.

Then came a trembling in the irresolute mass.

A deep exhalation of breath.

The bursting of a boiler.

In a trice, the front line of the trampled convulsed.

The force of this last fury scattered the Manchu. In an unstaunchable movement the rebels flung themselves around behind the burning granary through the two deserted eastern gates Tungchih and Ch’ihua, out of the Tartar city, out of Peking.

Flight carried them into the dumb nightcool plain, laid them in front of small villages.

Pitch dark the Forbidden City. Ch’ien-lung Sighed at the window

of his palace, a dim oil lamp on the little table beside him. In his hand he still held his panegyric to Mukden. Chia-ch'ing was praying, prostrate before a low statue of K'ungfu-tze on a bronze pedestal. The Emperor regarded him icily. When the prince stood up the scornful old man clapped his hands, whispered something to the eunuchs. Chia-ch'ing saw the heads of the two treacherous officers of the watch on wooden platters.

The black banners of the White Waterlily and the Truly Powerless swept northward and eastward. The failure of the rebellious Imperial regiments was soon explained. Ch'ien-lung, informed, had had the suspect senior officers arrested the previous evening and locked in the Vermilion City. Lodged in the northern quarter that lay exposed to the attack, they were all freed during the battle. Five had fallen, four others, among them Yellow Bell, were dragged along in the flight. The intimidated turncoat soldiers had been set upon by their comrades in the night and defeated. The two officers, so cleverly won over, had it seemed been summarily despatched by Ch'ien-lung.

The three chief leaders—Wang Lun, Ngo, Yellow Bell—came quickly together. Wang raged against his troops. Not a few of his adherents were beheaded along the way, found guilty of spreading panic. All the heat of his rage was directed at the defeated troops. It was due only to his granite nature that just two days later the army was proceeding in close order towards the northeast, directly towards the approaching Chao Hui. Six thousand men under Ngo remained as rearguard. Contact was maintained with irregular bands; they were brought around to methodical plundering and assaults.

Chao Hui declined all support from the provincial army. At news of the defeat of the insurrectionaries in Peking he rounded up all his remaining available manpower.

In the thunder and lightning of the summer's first storm, ten scorching days after the flight from Peking, the armies met on the

hills of Yingp'ing. The snorting and maneshaking grunts in the sky, the baring of teeth, whipping of tails, rolling of eyes went unobserved from the flat hilltop. From the black air a giant gong hung above the armies on an invisible cord; its beats incited. Two white panthers leapt past each other. The soldiers of Ili gave themselves to the delights of a sated blood thirst. The sectarians yielded to the embrace of their bitterest foes, cracked their spines.

Chao Hui swayed on his grey horse, up on the hill. Wang Lun rolled his wheel along the road, milled his corn. Then the blackness of heaven was ripped asunder, hailstones pelted from the gash, danced on skulls. The Truly Powerless fought in the dazzling chaos of the storm with icy calm. No wound troubled them. It was all the same if they lived or died. The flames of the Ili soldiers failed to eat through, began to smoulder, to flicker. No furious assault followed from the rebels; calmly, not so much impetuous as impelled by involuntary necessity, they overwhelmed the enemy.

As Chao Hui turned back with his devastated soldiers the rebels, drawn on, dogged his heels. Both fleeing. Running from the field, leaving the broken men, ox wagons, unmuscled swords and clubs, as if it were stinking ichor.

The defeated Imperial general barricaded himself in the town of Shanhaikwan.

Yellow Bell and Wang Lun rode around the western, inland section of the town.

The general's red palace flashed like an erect halberd; to the south the grey memorial arch splayed its legs; the inscriptions on its brow boasted of victories over Mongol princes of old.

From the higher ground beyond the town the slime-yellow sea could be seen; white sails of junks preened themselves on the water. The town slid into the sea: it sprinkled the rivermouth and the sheltered coast with houseboats. If not for the yardthick wall with its watchtowers, this rockhard gnashing jawbone of the town, the rebels would be able to chase the Imperial troops into the sea with one

thrust.

Yellow Bell looked dreamily at the grey roofs on which weak sunlight played. He recalled that night when the full moon shone and they had stood at the edge of a copse by a ruined town. The tables were turned. How long now till these walls met their fate?

Wang touched his arm. If it was up to him, the town would soon be taken. But how strong and precious had the brothers and sisters been in the Mongolian town, how strong!

“Do you know, Yellow Bell, what Fate looks like? Like a corpse. She won’t be spoken to, or comforted, or angered. You can wave cloths to her soul in gardens, on roofs, outside the door, in the yard.

“How many now are still alive of the brothers from Nank’ou? I don’t think the earth has ever taken so quickly so many splendid warriors; the land smells sweet with their spirits. And I am left, and I’m to lead to victory. And what is it I do now, on and on? Devour, sate the ground with precious bodies, behind Hochien, in Peking, at Yingp’ing. They didn’t want to take me with them. Sacrifices pile up before me, I’m a corpse already that the ground refuses to snatch, so as to keep me away from those so dearly sacrificed. And so I shall tear around the earth a while longer; the name Wang Lun will resound like the name of a demon from Hell; I’ll fall asleep somewhere, sometime, and not know why it all happened.”

They dismounted in a copse of elms, tethered their horses, sat on moss.

Yellow Bell, his expression pained, stroked Wang’s shoulder. “What is this? What is this?”

“We must conquer the empire for ourselves. We must set up the Ming emperors, who shall be our emperors. It can’t come to pass that it was all for nothing. Ma No said his brothers and sisters were forged together into a ring; he didn’t want to save himself from me. And I say the same. We can’t let this be torn from us, not through any defeat: we must set up the empire of the Mings. This buzzes through and through me. I hold fast to this rod of iron: the Way is foreordained; it has nothing to do with me.”

“What do you mean, Wang Lun: it has nothing to do with you?”

Wang turned mysteriously to the tall officer. “There’s a difference between you and me. I am the soil in which the Wu-wei grew, that took part of my soul from me. Earlier I believed I had to prepare a lovely, thriving, gentle home for the Wu-wei among the people of Chihli, ran here and there with Yellow Leaper. Now Wu-wei has acquired a voice and a resonant throat of its own, whispers clearly that it was a spirit of my body and I should give it shelter and a resting place in me. It laughs at me, as Ma No used to laugh. Oh, Ma No, who instructed me on Nank’ou about the mild guiding Buddhas, is so often with me. Now, dear brother, everything is pointing at me and has such a strange tormented look. My wife sits in the Lower Reaches and doesn’t mourn me; but my son that I produced without a wife, my Wu-wei, whimpers for me. You know what I’m trying to say. My son is whimpering. I must protect the brothers and sisters as I’ve always done. We have to set up the empire of the Ming….”

The officer looked askance without bringing himself to an answer, then: “You’re different from Ma No, quite different. My brother Wang Lun follows a good path with fear and counterfear. Yellow Bell hasn’t experienced much of Wang Lun’s hard fate. Yellow Bell thinks one should be bold, should challenge the world. We are children of the Hundred Surnames. I too say: what has it to do with me? We must dean our house, dear brother Wang, so that it goes well with us.”

Wang gently touched his hand. “Let’s move on, brother. Since I came up from the Lower Reaches I’ve been ridiculously confused. I know only that I was born in Hunkang-ts’un, have such strong bones and such a mouth; otherwise I know nothing of myself. Once I knew a Mohammedan and a priest. They were my companions once. You mustn’t pay so much attention to what I say. Ngo shook his head too.”

They rode almost to within bowshot of the wall, where soldiers of the besieged army were patrolling. They could see over the wall, make out packed streets, distinguish idling gangs of soldiers among the hawkers in the markets. Wang Lun’s horse frisked; on the rider’s face appeared a pleased curiosity; the cunning eyes dissected the

distant tiny groups. At a shout from Yellow Bell he pulled the horse about; the patrolling soldiers had drawn their bows. They galloped on around the town.

All Wang's torment evaporated in a flash. He cancelled Ma No and the Broken Melon in the Mongolian town as with a slash through a failed calculation. He had followed Ma No, who without him put into practice all the teaching of Wu-wei. In excitement and horror Wang observed its progress and its end. It was his duty to bring to a conclusion this affair, which was in fact his own affair; no baseness should snarl its way into the death of this dream. In a spirit of vengeance he still carried his sword around, ran murderous from the bloody field, but in his heart he knew already there was nothing to avenge, there was no enemy here against whom he could raise his sword, because everything had to end like this.

And when Ngo told him the story of Ma No's death, with one savage tug revenge was laid bare: he was overcome, annihilated, throttled more foully than the T'ouszu. Disgust came: the whole Wu-wei was finished! Complete seclusion in the Lower Reaches beckoned, a few months of commandeered rest; the peasant in Wang came slowly to the fore. Meanwhile in Chihli his teaching gnawed about itself. He couldn't stay deaf and blind for long, shake off his past like dust; his rage against the Emperor uncorked him again. The Wu-wei, though hurtling down the road, was his own dearest creation. Half pushed he came back; the tempestuous movement blew him along with it. Often he didn't know what he should do, thought how easy nonresistance would be and saw himself in an endless, hopeless slaying. He couldn't find himself. Looking over the wall of Shanhaikwan he saw the lively bustle of the marketplaces, streets: a joyful excitement flashed through him; decisions, an unfounded urge were hoist up within him: "Into the place! Into it, without weapons." He didn't know that it was the image of Chinan-fu there before him, that he was sweating Wu-wei from every pore. Endure, endure, suffer, bear! Don't fight back! Su-ko! For the first time he loved life again. Whooping he raised his arms towards the town. With a feeling of weakness he wanted once

again to be the town fool.

The army of the league had completely abandoned its initial division into two parts. The brotherhood of arms bound the White Waterlily and the Truly Powerless indissolubly together. These strong men and women ran, struck tents, pushed ration wagons, wielded dubs and swords; black banners flapped; they had no eyes for anything more distant. Victory must be theirs, the Manchu driven out, golden Mings back on the throne. The Truly Powerless differed in no way from the secret society, except that they were prouder, in battle behaved like berserkers, in camp fought dangerous bouts for sport by twos or fours, made a show of menacing confidence.

They camped in a wide semicircle around Shanhaikwan, rested from their latest battles, awaited reinforcements that were on the march from Shantung and Kansu. From Chihli and the neighbouring provinces there were reports of provincial armies mobilizing.

Newcomers claimed to know that provincial troops had grown to enormous numbers. Every piece of intelligence was greeted with laughter and delight.

At news of the spreading rebellion two men came trekking in from Nanking claiming to be descended from the Ming imperial line. They reached the rebels the day after their defeat in Peking, fought at once with great bravado in the clash with Chao Hui. They were cousins, the elder a peasant in his fifties, the younger perhaps in his twenties. They stood out through their gravity ~md an amiable, indisputably distinguished demeanour. Of course they could support their claim only by tales of a very fanciful kind, found general credence.

Returning from his ride around the town, Wang asked the younger of the Ming cousins whether he was married. He was not. Wang studied the delicate, deeptanned boy, suggested that he might like to consider marrying. The slender fellow turned his long face away, smiling: he rejoiced at Wang's friendly manner; he had kept a little box of candied dates for Wang, and they would have nice times together. Wang seconded that, and where had he got the dates from? Sucking and spitting in front of a tent they looked contentedly at

one another. It was a long time since he'd tasted dates like these, thought Wang; the last time in Shantung, long ago now. In Poshan once he'd been invited to the house of a merchant, a leader of the White Waterlily; he'd had to eat lots of them there and enjoyed himself. Yes, replied the Ming, they were quite rare in this region, especially now. Was he really not married, continued Wang. Marrying in wartime was a sign of great prudence; for you might have a son and then you'd die happier. Now, he didn't need to look at him like that. Straight to the point: would the young Ming like to marry the daughter of general Chao Hui? If he wanted to, he had only to give the nod; Wang would play matchmaker.

The young fellow bowed very gravely to Wang; he didn't want to harm Wang, but he didn't deserve to be made fun of; he set no store by his Ming ancestry these days. Wang repeated unruffled: it was all so clear and simple, if Chao Hui gave away his daughter it would mean the general was won over. If he didn't give her away—well then, they'd see. The Mings shouldn't show themselves hostile: disarm with peace offerings, think diplomatically. Confused, blushing, the Ming stammered something. Anyhow, said Wang firmly, before they set about cooking the millet it was all settled that he, the Ming, being unbetrothed, had entrusted Wang with the matchmaking. He must now write down his birthday, year, month, hour, for the eventual horoscopes.

There were adherents of the sectarians in the town. The besiegers tried to establish contact with them. Their initial efforts to despatch information and assignations on scraps of paper in hollowed lances came to nought. Either the messages did not arrive or they went to the wrong address: every failed attempt added to the work of the brothers inside. More promising was the sea route.

Two days after the siege began, a great fleet of well manned ships arrived off the town from the south. The besiegers, at first jubilant because the sailors did not wear Imperial uniform but were clearly pirates, were severely disappointed at their first approach. The rebels' junks were simply rammed by two of the great ships. They were pirates hired by the Tsungtu of Chihli, their leader rewarded in

advance with a peacock's feather from the Emperor. They sat proud in the water, captured suspicious boats, extorted money from the town and settlements along the coast and patronised Chao Hui.

Wang Lun went with fifty of his boldest followers into one of these coastal villages. He told his men they'd open the town gates from within. Well armed they approached the fishing village where the crews of three great ships were lying. Noisily they emerged from a lane into the main street that crept past eroded dunes. The surprised pirates in straw hats and woven straw cloaks came from the houses into the street. Wang climbed up to a tavern with a crowd in front of it, asked who the ships out there belonged to.

One of them, about Wang's size but probably not their leader, pushed to the fore and said it was none of Wang's business. Wang knocked his wide straw hat off: he shouldn't talk like that; if the ownership of the vessels was unclear, then he and his companions would take them. The pirates roared cheerfully: to be sure they had no owners, but meanwhile they belonged to them, and they weren't about to give them up.

Then he was quite satisfied, said Wang. He'd only wanted to know, that was all. But had they seen any smaller ships anywhere, sailing junks, that might be taken? He and his friends wanted to go to sea, since there was nothing doing on land.

The pirates agreed with that; regarding the newcomers with the smugness of possession said mockingly: to be sure there were junks ready for the finding; they were spry looking lads, doubtless good swimmers all. During the recent hailstorm sixty small junks and five big ships had been taken, six li offshore. They'd be easy to get hold of, they didn't belong to anyone now and were splendidly fitted out. If they knew how to dive they couldn't miss the boats; they were over that way, south by east.

Wang found this advice extraordinary; he'd take good note of such precise directions. Of course his comrades, like himself, were too little used to the water to indulge in such strenuous diving practice right away. Since according to their description the matter was so simple they could all get something out of it. He and his companions

would take over the ships out there (as landlubbers they were better suited to such work), while they could swim beside the ships. He'd be sure to lead them to the exact spot, six li offshore, where the sixty small junks and five big ships were waiting.

Silence and whispering among the pirates, quizzical looks on both sides. The beach was empty, the sailors crowded in front of the tavern. They saw the strangers' axes, daggers, bows.

As they kept silent, Wang said they should think the matter over quietly. Meanwhile he'd go down to the beach with his gang and take a look at the ships.

After some toing and froing among the stocky men who seemed to be the leaders, one of them with a hare lip came up to Wang and asked politely who they were. A regretful smile played on the impassive face of the stranger: he could smite his breast for forgetting such basic manners. You picked up such uncouth habits on the highways. They came from various villages of north Shantung, had joined forces so as to break through to a more fertile country; nothing had gone their way; near Peking they'd been forced to merge with the rebels but had been defeated, had eaten dogrice for a couple of days in the College of Great Humanity in Peking, now wanted to try their luck at sea.

And why were they so heavily armed.

So as not to have to beg any more.

After this exchange the interlocutors stepped back with deep bows. Wang's people barred the street on both sides; the situation for the pirates was hopeless.

Then they came to Wang with a proposal, urging him and several others into the tavern. They said they'd been hired by the Emperor with their ships for the defence of Shanhaikwan. Perhaps the strangers would like to join them and earn good Imperial pay.

Wang expressed willingness, if the pay was high enough for him and his people.

Certainly: every man would get two taels for two months' work.

The strangers conferred among themselves. Their leader replied that it wasn't enough. Apart from that, what security would be

given. As soon as they reached harbour they'd be jeered at and set ashore.

After much haggling, agreement was reached. The armed strangers take over two ships as security, the third ship sails into harbour, fetches back half the money, whereupon they all approach the town. If the third ship comes back with police, it counts as treachery and will be avenged on the crews of the other two ships.

The plan was put into action. Wang got the money, they boarded the ships, anchored off the town. When they disembarked at the pirates' invitation the adventure came to a swift end, for behind their boats echoed the mocking laughter of the sailors, whose trick had succeeded. The ships, putting back to sea with the others, were lost to Wang and his men.

Wang and several companions went into the town, complaining for the other half of their money. The mandarins turned him away: such contracts had no legal force, there was no way to arrest the pirates, for the present they were friends of the Son of Heaven. He unearthed his followers in the town, changed his clothing, strolled in the markets and streets. Several days were taken up with loitering, visiting temples, listening to gossip, haggling with pipesellers, lounging in teahouses. It was fine fresh summer weather. He paid no attention to his companions during these days. Then he gathered them all at the house of a prison warder: his intention was to stir up incidents in the town leading to revolts, and then they'd see how it went.

Chao Hui's palace stood solitary behind the town on the northwestern Magnolia Slope. The defeated general seldom left the house, wandered from room to room, from the courtyard into the garden. He no longer stood at the window facing the sea; it angered him that the sea lay there to which the rebels had forced him back, that his soldiers and his commander's luck were as nothing and he like a cat about to be drowned, yowling up and down beside the water.

He sat much in his study with its frieze-covered walls, puffed on a hookah and brooded. He was a fine gate guard of Peking! By a

puzzling turn of the battle Peking was saved at the last moment; he was trapped on the coast; where was his martial glory, what did Ch'ien-lung think? He could no longer accuse A-kuei and knowing eunuchs of despatching him to hopeless tasks. There was a battle. He was defeated. Ch'en Yuan-li, the young inexperienced Tsungtu of Chihli, will take pleasure in relieving the town. The lord of Shantung and Pi-yuan of Honan will gain honour at the expense of Chao the failure. He'd lost face. Shame on his house, shame on his ancestors.

Youthful Hai-t'ang, his principal wife, consoled the melancholy man. She drove her greying husband out of the house to inspect walls, keep discipline in the town. But Chao detested this town that once he had loved. He loathed its ambiguous citizens, was reluctant to see the deceitful Taot'ai T'ang Shao-yi, who when the troops entered the town had expressed gratitude that he would now be spared the fate of the neighbouring magistrates, admittedly at the expense of his revered friend Chao Hui. The wounds of his son Lao-hsü had long since healed; the general sat idly with him at games of morra, sat in the women's quarters, listened to his wife as she instructed their sweet fifteen year old daughter Nai on the p'ip'a.

One morning, while the entire body of troops was exercising on the elevated ground between town and wall, from an alley in the northwest of the town emerged as if from the earth a gaudy festive procession heading straight for Chao Hui's house. It appeared to concern some happy event: the men, following two goldpainted sedan chairs, wore long red scarves over their black garb. With gongbeats and cries of "Make way!" they marched in the warm sunlight; the train snaked rapidly towards solitary Magnolia Hill. The "Little Father without a tongue", Chao's house slave, bowing grotesquely, accepted the enormous red visiting card that was handed to him from one of the chairs.

The lean mandarin inside put on his chain of pearls, went to meet his guests in the Hall of Twelve Green Pillars. An unknown Manchurian name was written on the card. Six of the strangers, their demeanour grave, strong expressive faces, entered the hall:

Wang Lun and five companions. Wang introduced himself first by

the Manchurian name on the card, the others with invented names, then at the invitation of the host they sat at a little table between two pillars and were silent. Chao Hui clapped his hands for servants and tea. Blood flowed into his face; no one appeared. In shame he begged his guests' forgiveness, clapped again trembling with agitation. But the strangers brushed the matter aside, soothing: they were here on business, arrived by ship, would stay only a short while; menials were the same everywhere.

They exchanged quizzical glances. With a sudden movement Chao made to rise and look for the servants, but again the strangers begged him not to trouble himself; their affair could be settled expeditiously.

Again they were silent. Wang, in a black gown that did not reach his ankles, took a fan from his girdle, hardened his expression, said with a cold unwavering stare that he and his companions were come to ask for the hand of the renowned general's daughter. During a sojourn in the Lower Reaches he had heard of the cultivated and artistic Hai-t'ang, daughter of the former Tsungtu of Anhui, Huang Tzu-tung; the whole town spoke of the delicacy and good breeding of the daughter. The approach might be unorthodox, but the master on whose behalf he had come had no other means of developing the connection. With his long arm he passed across the bare table a large red envelope containing the personal particulars.

The general sat rigid. The corner of his mouth twitched. Wang spoke calmly, invited him to open the envelope; what did the old rhyme say: "How does one cut an axe handle? Without an axe it is impossible. How does one take a wife? Without a matchmaker she cannot be got."

When the general, glancing at the visiting card, moved his lips, opened his mouth, tonelessly asked who he was, the guest replied that the visiting card was to deceive the servants. He was Wang Lun, a leader of the besieging army. He was acting for a Ming prince who was to ascend the throne. Admittedly this man was a Chinese; but no Chinese despised the Manchus to the extent that he would not seek a well-bred Manchu daughter for his principal wife.

The mandarin, springing up, rushed to the gong, shouted, “Servants! Tai-tsung! Tai-tsung!”

The strangers scrambled to their feet as the mandarin rushed past to the window. Two covered the window; Chao Hui, slipping past, falling, was lifted up by iron hands, steered with much bowing back to his place.

Wang listened at the door, at the window; in a trice stood before the bitterly groaning general with the dispirited eyes. The bill of particulars had been brought, the betrothal sought; now it was up to the general to take the letter to the bride and collate the good and evil fortune of the eight marriage signs. They would take back his answer.

The general struck the table, exploded: “Criminals! Scoundrels!” Four held him, bound arms and legs with red scarves, laid him in the dark passageway by the door. Wang whispered, “Think it over, general. We’ll be back.” And with a thick writing brush that he took from a wall cabinet he painted on the polished floor of the hall the menacing sign of the Ming dynasty. Already two of the men were climbing into the sedan chairs outside in the yard; gongs, cries of “Make way!” In a flash the procession was off down Magnolia Hill, disappeared into a side alley.

Half an hour later five officers, invited by Chao Hui to lunch, found two house slaves in the front courtyard in the dirt and gagged. The Little Father, freed, ran howling into the house; the house reverberated to cries. The women came from their chambers as Little Father blubbered. Calling anxiously they swarmed in search of the general; someone tripped over him. In the bright reception hall Hai-t’ang held his sullied head. He sighed; they applied wine to his lips. Palely he regarded the many figures thronging around him. Officers and servants took up the strangers’ trail. It was hours before they discovered which alley the procession had vanished down. A military search of every house in the neighbourhood yielded nothing suspicious; the few inhabitants of the alley were promptly flogged. The outcome of the investigation, reported to Chao Hui that evening, was that the besiegers must have many friends in the town.

Since rebels could not have infiltrated via the walls the strangers must have come from the sea. The police at the customs house should be reinforced; a sharp eye should be kept on the friendly pirates and on ships bringing supplies.

They turned over every cellar, every ruined house in the town in their search for Wang and his accomplices. Chao Hui went to Hai-t'ang's room; he tore himself free from her. "What remains, Hai-t'ang? You're so clever yet do not see what is so obvious. I've become the mockery of the town, the butt of our enemies."

"Let your enemies laugh. They'll scream soon enough, as they screamed in Peking. They've beaten our dear Lao-hsü, assaulted you, now they want our delicate Nai in their clutches. A silken cord is not for you; it's for the town officials, the prefect Tang Shao-yi and the others. Avenge yourself, Hui."

"It's no use. We can't hold out. They're infiltrating from the sea. They run about the streets, in the markets among us; perhaps they greet us and we don't recognize them. Sung is right. When grains of sand are against us we should go away. We Manchus are hated.

They've made me a figure of scorn."

"If only you were Hai-t'ang, Hui! It is on your child and mine that they spit. I will not tolerate it. If you won't take revenge, then I shall."

"What are you saying, Hai-t'ang? They sat here in this house, now they are—where? Take revenge, when you sit in a cage."

"T'ang Shao-yi is deceitful. He has no faith in you. He's afraid for himself; he made this shameful deed possible for the rebels, he wants to keep his own hands clean. The silken cord is for him."

Chao opened the window. The elms stood with their sparse leaves against the red sky. Mild air wafted in; sudden sweet singing from the garden.

Hai-t'ang tripped across to him at the window. "The girl is singing." She inclined her head to her left shoulder in rapture. "Why didn't we take advantage of the peach blossom time, when Yüan Ching's parents asked about marriage? She would not be with us now."

“I want the sweet girl with us still.”

“But Chao Hui also wishes he had married her off at the time of the peach blossom. They’ll come again, those criminals, tie you up, tie up the slaves, tie me up, abduct the child. They want to steal her, they will steal her. Oh! if only Nai were not here with us.”

“Quiet, Hai-t’ang, the girl can hear you. She’s singing again. The house is secure. I’ve doubled the watch. The mad dogs shall not bark again in my yard. I’ll have T’ang Shao-yi incarcerated. I’ll wipe the grin from the scoundrel’s face.”

“What use is T’ang Shao-yi to me? You can imprison seventy; seven hundred more will come. The child is singing. How long will she sing? Where can I take her? Hui, what is to happen with my child?”

Hai-t’ang sat on the carpet, rocked herself crying. Tears smeared the red kohl jars of her round cheeks. Coloured tears dropped greasily from her chin onto her light blue gown. “On whose behalf did Wang Lun come?”

“Wang Lun? On behalf of a Ming prince. It’s ridiculous, he didn’t mention the man’s name. He gave me to understand what an honour the Ming prince was bestowing on us, seeking a Manchu daughter for his wife. Let us not speak of it.”

“I don’t know what is so bad between the Manchus and the Chinese. But if you hadn’t been unjust it would not have come to this rebellion. Look at T’ang Shao-yi: such rogues in every town. Wasn’t rebellion inevitable? And we have to suffer. It’s a sign of your weakness and obtuseness that rebellion should break out in the land. Uproot the sectarians; in ten years they’ll come again. How can I help Nai? Where is Yüan Ching?”

“Yüan Ching is doing duty on the walls.”

“I should like to see him. You must send someone and invite him to us.”

“He can’t get away in the next few days. I don’t know—”

“But I know. I want to talk to him. I want to see him. I want to speak to his parents. We must discuss what will happen with Nai. We decided against giving her away in the spring. Now it is urgent.”

“The signs will not be good.”

“You needn’t say the signs will not be good. You needn’t make me even more unhappy, Hui. She’s our child, and we can’t stand by the window and listen to her sing and sing, knowing nothing. What will tonight bring, what will the morning bring? She must sleep with her maids in my room. I shall see Yüan Ching, I shall speak to his parents. Or let me tell you, when Wang Lun comes back, and he will come back, depend on it, I shall be present. I shall see him, ask him on whose behalf he seeks our daughter’s hand. The prince will come to us, if he’s not a wicked man. And he shall have Nai. Yes, Hui, the Chinese are not worse than the Manchus. It will be good if we can be reconciled. I will not lose my child because of your vices.”

“Now, dear Hai-t’ang, you don’t know what you’re saying. No, you don’t know. Do you realize what a scoundrel this Wang Lun is? A Ming prince! He wants to show us what danger we’re in and what he can do with us.”

“I shall speak to Yüan Ching. He must be released from watch duty for one day, for tomorrow. No, don’t laugh, Hui. I can’t live. As I am a woman, you must not laugh. I must bear the whole misery. If some disgrace befalls you, you snatch up a silken cord. Help me, Hui, help your Hai-t’ang, whom once you loved.”

Negotiations between the two families were swiftly concluded. Meanwhile, since the besieging army was not ready to storm the town, reinforcements arriving only slowly because detachments of provincial troops were hampering the efforts of southern rebels to link up with the Chihli army, Wang immersed himself in the bustle of the town. Almost consciously he was reliving his youth in Chinan. When the Taot’ai T’ang Shao-yi was dragged from his yamen, led to the marketplace with a cangue around his neck, Wang was among the gawpers who read the placard tied to the venomously squinting official’s breast and back: that the Taot’ai should serve as a lesson to all in the town who directly or indirectly expressed sympathy with the rebels and neglected to sniff out suspicious persons. Wang was the first to break up the shy shuffling and whispering round about the mighty man, by picking rotten gourd peel from the ground and

taking careful aim at the man's face without letting fly. But when the missile smacked into the shackled man's eyes the general jeering, teasing, spitting stopped only when the lame warder came up, dressed in a blacklacquered straw helmet with a black cock's feather; squatting down he was hit on the hand by a dead fish and with a roar laid into the crowd with his short bamboo.

He spent a few days with a priest in the dirty little temple of childbestowing Kuan-yin. He felt his way patronisingly into the modest swindles of this harmless miserly concocter of powders, then strolled around in a false grey beard, played with children and told them exciting and funny stories. Only occasionally did he call on friends, to hear the latest about the reorganization of the army. He gurgled his pipe for hours on end on the sunny veranda of a restaurant; in his brooding the only thing he missed was his peasant girl, who had stayed behind in the camp. On a beach to the north of the landing place he lay in stony sand. On many a morning the sea looked at him balefully from yellow rheumy eyes, spat out clotted slime, snarled. Then again its appearance changed from greyblack to purple and back again, imperially gorgeous. Under a fresh breeze long trains of waves, carriages with dazzling harness, danced to shore. So peaceful, trickling sand through fingers. Here a hollow, there a dune. Sails appearing, bobbing. Clambering of great junks up the curve of the world over the floating line of the horizon. Hunkang-ts'un lay to the southeast. Wang Lun made little sleepy eyes, wound up his queue.

The tenth day after the bandits appeared at the general's house came a rumour that a wedding was being prepared between his daughter and her betrothed, young Yüan Ching. That night the daughter woke up, roused her mother and the maids who were sleeping in the same room. Starting up in the dark they too heard strange scrapings and shufflings outside in the corridor. For ages the women did not dare stir. When the noises continued, Hai-t'ang flung open a window, cried fear into the rear courtyard where the watchmen slept. Almost at once torches flew across the dark area towards the house, which echoed with movement. Hai-t'ang opened

the door a crack and shrank back. In the garish light of torches a broad table stood in front of the door; it must have been brought from the reception hall. The men jammed puzzled heads together over the fine gold sceptre, the silver rings, the two little purses of silk, the casket with its double happiness sign. There was a scraping, quite near. The men shone torches under the table. There in a wooden cage two redpainted geese cackled and flapped their wings against the bars, blinded by the light. During the night someone had secretly brought bridal gifts into the house. The black fan with the sign of the Ming, upright against the wall, told who.

The servants were no less shocked than Hai-t'ang, who was carried swooning into her room. Her sobs and her daughter's wailing filled the women's quarters until morning, when they had to dress and make up for the wedding. Chao Hui did not ask when the soldiers and servants returned during the night from searching the area; he knew already they would find nothing.

The best astrologers in the town had given contradictory advice as to the timing of the ceremony, indeed as to whether they could even give their blessing to this marriage. Of the five astrologers, three found the day and hour favourable for the union, a fourth read in the eight characters of the natal year, day and hour of the two betrothed a dubious conjunction of the third class; the fifth advised firmly against the planned timing: although the betrothed were ruled by the compatible elements Metal and Water, the wedding required a month under the sign of the Horse or the Rat, not the fatal month of the Dog. He would have to calculate the terrible marriage of the Five Demons.

The wedding day was illumined by a mist-shrouded sun. From the rear balcony of the Chao residence a red silk banner hung motionless, embroidered with the characters: "Dragon and Phoenix presage happiness". In the afternoon the lady of honour, an elderly relative of Hai-t'ang's, sleeveless gown and red veil, climbed into a plain sedan chair and was carried through streets in which there was a greater commotion than usual: fishermen had just reported that a combined contingent of provincial troops from Chihli and Shantung

lay scarcely a day's march from the town, and there was great agitation in the besieging camp. A tent had been erected in the courtyard of the Sung family. There the gentlemen dined; in the house the lady of honour consecrated the red silk bridal veil with smoke from nine sticks of incense, filled a bowl with millet, wheat, beans, arranged the bridal bed. To the din of drums, trumpets and gongs a child laid four apples at the corners of the bed, protected the room with two little pieces of charcoal at the threshold. The lady glided out, climbed into the mule cart; accompanied by outriders, marshals and beaters arrived at the stiff silent house, far from Magnolia Hill, of the Controller of Customs Chao Hsin, a cousin of the general.

At grey dawn the bride and her attendants had been brought here so that the wedding could be conducted in secret. In the sedan chair Hai-t'ang begged the general for a day's postponement of the ceremony, after such a horrible night. But Chao Hui, his eyes menacing, said "No." Hai-t'ang knew with what effort she had wrested a clandestine ceremony from him, fell silent, wrung her hands.

Sweet Nai stood before her mother a miracle of gold, motionless in the unearthly splendour that Hai-t'ang had heaped upon her: purple wedding gown with broad sleeves, glinting diadem in her highpiled hair; blue orchids bloomed on the sleeves, the magic unicorn sported on the swelling bluegreen undergarments, a pair of ducks swam side by side across a pond; the uprearing phoenix twittered shrilly. Hai-t'ang squeezed the hands of her daughter, who gazed from anxious eyes; laughing she played with the perfumed veil that the lady of honour gave her, chattered, sang the song she had heard her daughter sing in the garden. Music approached: the eight gentlemen who were to fetch the bride had arrived. Lantern bearers, shield bearers, musicians in front; they wore gay green smocks with red spots, and flat felt hats. A swarm of children leaped around the yard: mischievously they barred the gate to the gentlemen, who knocked, threw coins, until the door opened to shrieks and huzzas from the children and the musicians crowded in. Chao Hui had taken

personal charge of guarding the procession, despite Hai-t'ang's warning against any military measures. After dining in the reception hall with the eight gentlemen he went over to the women's quarters, where the bride took leave of her mother, tripped around with unsteady face, quivering lips, not daring to cry. Carpets had been laid over the steps down into the courtyard. On thin soles the childlike bride rustled beside her father, who wore his Imperial yellow jacket of honour with the chain of pearls; a peacock's feather swayed in his cap; he strode forth in boots of black silk. By the steps he put his arms around his daughter, lifted her down into the closed red palanquin; the girl regarded him meekly. A trumpet signal: the bearers in blue jackets, yellow trousers took up the weight, paced slowly forwards. The procession formed itself, and bright music echoed down from the proud house that gleamed sombrely over the evening town. Chao Hui followed at a distance, in a closed sedan chair.

Increasing commotion in the streeets. Thirty soldiers, ten mounted, the general's bodyguard, escorted him with halberds. It grew darker as they snaked along the streets, burrowed through the markets. Lanterns flared. Trumpets alternated with flutesong.

Without incident they reached the hastily opened gate of the Yuan residence, at the entrance to which the gentlemen were waiting. Whitish smoke rose from the middle of the courtyard: the bearers lifted the lovely bride over glowing coals.

Then, just as servants were closing the gates, a disturbance arose in the onlooking mass of people, in which many soldiers were mixed. The crush impelled a few of the women and men in the fore into the yard. They tried to squeeze back into the crowd; since this meant shoving others, received blows. A violent squabbling and squealing arose by the dusky gate. As more and more became involved people heaved excited and curious across the yard. The bearers had not yet deposited the bride at the threshold of the house when the pummeling compressed throng overwhelmed the carpetdecked patio, hemmed in the palanquin, dragged aside a number of the elegant gentlemen waiting at the door. Amid cries of

“Way!” soldiers and police laid into the seething confusion with clubs and whips. Many turned, tripped on the carpets, went tumbling, sank beneath the feet of the mob. A tall soldier, drumming blindly on caps and skulls with his staff, was attacked by two men. The bamboo was twisted from his hand, hard fingers stabbed his eyes. At the muffled screams of “Murder! Murder!” insensate terror seized a number of the people. In several places in the street as well as in the yard soldiers and civilians began to wrestle, tear each other’s clothes. Weapons appeared in the hands of fishermen, coolies, well dressed strollers.

The soldiers of the wedding procession, mounted and on foot, driven together with Chao Hui to the back wall of the yard where they were unable to open the gate to the second yard, set their halberds hissing to the bayonet position. The riders used spurs on their well-groomed mounts which, shying at the din, reared up on their hind legs, smashed faces with their hooves, skidded on bodies, buried sprawling men. In a moment the space was covered with falling, clambering, roaring figures. The ones in front tried to avoid halberd thrusts. Walled in by those behind they curled up, hunched their bodies small; they were forced onto the points by the mob that expanded like a gas bubble, or else collapsed to the ground where their bones were snapped and air driven from their bodies by the weight of horses and men.

Chao Hui’s strident bellow sought his daughter’s palanquin.

The last mounted soldier shouted back that he could see a heap of red cloth and splintered wood in the middle of the yard, before he threw up his arms and tipped sideways with his horse ripped open from below. The soldiers’ halberds trampled underfoot, the bluejackets surrounded and devoured, ground down by the struggling throng.

With a crack the overstrained rear door burst open. The hemmed-in soldiers, Chao Hui tumbled, flew in retreat across the second yard. In the street, in the front courtyard arms could move again. Now they saw the trampled and the crushed among them.

Gangs of stalwart men, toiling in several places among the crowd,

cried grimfaced, “To the Prefecture! Down with the soldiers!” They brandished daggers, knives, swords. They stretched and unseamed the mob in the street: “The soldiers are killing us!”

Townsfolk blindly took up the cry, shielding their eyes from the Sight of sprawled bodies, the battered, speared. Howls of outrage flickered through neighbouring streets. Running groups of raging, bleeding, torn, maddened men and women coalesced. Everywhere house doors cracked open under kicks to howls of “Murder! The soldiers are killing us!”

The streets lay in darkness.

It foamed out of every street.

Distant parts of the town awoke. The cries echoed first over the Prefecture marketplace. Single figures shot like cannonballs from side alleys. Then the streets spewed larger clumps of mob across the huge square. At last the mob itself, thrusting up from every surrounding street simultaneously, a thousand-armed Buddha with a black face before the silent Prefecture, the prison, town barracks.

Dim lanterns glowed here and there, swam like boats over surf. The mute buildings engirdled this redeyed Buddha, whose body swelled; they dug into its side. Torches, hungry wolves, approached the courtyards, gatehouses of the Prefecture.

Before the flames that feasted in the yamen stuck their white heads out of the windows the prison had been broken open, the prisoners freed.

Tang Shao-yi recognized, at once throttled and hacked to pieces.

The ecstatic whoops of unseen murderers, the head of the Taot’ai stuck on a police stave, incited those farther back who called hungrily in chorus, “Bum! Destroy!” They scrabbled at each other, clambered onto shoulders.

Women, sucked into the surging stream of bodies, rolled their eyes, wrenched combs from their hair, moaned, tried to strip off their clothes, exuded white foam through grinding teeth. Their pupils shrank to pinpoints. They clung to the shoulders and backs of roaring men who brushed them off mechanically. Here and there a slender man, sensitive, frightened, hung around the sweaty neck of

a stranger, Sighed regretfully as the bluegreen flame erupted spreading from the breast of the crowd: “How beautiful, how beautiful.” Then his arms flickered like the hot glare. His brain spinning he was absorbed into the stiff stem throng.

The air overhead seethed.

Inside the barracks on the west side of the square two hundred alarmed soldiers barred the doorway. As the wooden rafters crackled they threw down bows and sabres, against the orders of their officers forced open the door. Suffocation ensued in the narrow entrance. The mob propelled itself across the courtyards.

From time to time billowing smoke concealed the great glare from the roofs. Then the flame suddenly laid aside its grey cloak, flared over the marketplace, illuminated the thousand twisted animal faces that black night had concealed.

Six groups stormed up the broad streets to the north; from the camp and the walls companies of troops drummed down. Trumpetblasts, hand to hand combat in dark streets. From roofs and nearby knolls arrows whispered, spears hissed into the heaving mad throng. The mass was thwarted. Fresh companies thudded down from the north, rammed into the insurgents, swung from low eaves, shot in long rows, forming up street by street towards the market. Through brief pauses in the howling came a distant wild trumpeting, scraping, rumbling; a landslide: the rebels outside were assaulting the gates. Mercilessly the crowd pressed northwards, ground against the barrier of soldiers.

When all at once those struck by arrows began to sink down, the crowd spat at the soldiers. Then it spread howling in rage towards the southern exits, smashed whatever came in its path. The wounded fell away, shrugged off from the mass. They did not wait until the main body, beaten back by the soldiers, rushed back across the smokethick marketplace and the raucous cries of soldiers and the drumming over stones drowned the yelling, jeering, whistling.

Groups fought for an hour in the marketplace and side streets. The Imperials, in possession of the northern part of the town and the market, strutted before the barricaded southern accesses. More

violent brawls raged by the western wall.

Next morning the victorious besiegers raised their black banners over the greater part of the walls, but the vanguard of the provincial army was already marching into their own camp. The decisive battle this day was over in the first hours of morning. The insurrectionaries, outnumbered, were defeated after the hardest of struggles with the fresh regular troops. They fled south-eastward, led by Wang Lun and Yellow Bell.

In the afternoon, fighting of little glory took place between the veterans of Hi, reinforced by provincial squads, and the insurrectionaries in the town. Even the pirates took part in this phase of the campaign, first capsizing the junks of refugees, then swarming ashore where they surrounded and took prisoner a small number of desperate combatants.

During this final battle, Chao Hui was discovered by provincial soldiers in the second courtyard of the Yuan residence. He was lying face down in a shed with contusions on both arms and hands, in a kind of swoon or distraction. He came to. They carried him through the ruined streets in a public sedan chair to his house.

A few hours later, on a greydraped bier, the corpse of little Nai was brought in. She had been crushed, then trampled into unrecognizability.

Sounds of battle receded from the town.

Red flagpoles were set in the soil before Chao's house; soulbanners to attract the dead were raised on them. On the patio of the roofed front courtyard lay the open coffin. Blue shoes embroidered with plum blossom, turtle, goose peeped out from the rich yellow blanket that covered the ruined face. Prayer formulas in the fabric besprinkled the dead girl. Around her throat beneath the blanket Hai-t'ang had placed a golden chain with a tiny glass phial, pushed a little letter into the phial in which she gave the girl's name, her clan, age. She described her beauty, breeding and innocence, the fate she had suffered. That the spirits might receive her cordially, and not mourn that she trod no more the soil of the Empire of the Flowering Middle.

Whitegarbed guests arrived in the afternoon, three times pressed foreheads to the ground before the libation table at the foot of the coffin; pipes shrilled, a guest poured out wine, drumbeats, reverberation of a single gong, silence. Two lamas in yellow robes, gilded diadems on their heads, sang litanies, swung censers. At evening near Magnolia Hill they burned pretty paper sedan chairs, silver shrine, spangled gowns, a treasure chest, lutes and fiddles, the bride's favourite books, to accompany her across the Nai-ho.

On the third day after her death, when the soul returns again, Chao Hui and Hai-t'ang hurried for long hours under the elms, searched in corners, dragged branches aside, called the vanished girl by every pet name, wept, cried, fell into each other's arms, clung listening to fenceposts in the garden, ran groaning after every birdcall, climbed onto the roof of the house. She must come back, the bad men had gone, the bridegroom awaited her. In her room nothing was changed, books and lutes lay around, her friends sobbed and wanted her back; the enemy were all defeated and they would move back to the sunny Lower Reaches. Oh the thuya trees there, the civet trees, the fan palms, if she would only think of them, the soft warm air and the banana groves. No mosquitoes would bite her. A boat, a little bright boat would be hers to travel in if she wanted to stay with her mother; yes, she could stay, she must stay, must only come back. They would live near Hsinghua, lakes full of roses that bloomed so fragrant. They wanted to be away from here, she must come, come, come! To her father, to her mother! Nai! Did her little soul want to come into the house, or down in the garden, or where? Nai! Nai!

Knees lame with weariness they felt their way into a room, sank down onto a bench. Again they pulled themselves upright, dragged themselves out, sought, waved doll's fans, lifted their faces, called, sobbed.

With grizzling pipes, monotonous drumming, youths drew up outside the house on the morning of the funeral. Music rustled against the walls like the unsure hands of a delirious consumptive; an overloud gongbeat jarred at regular intervals.

Twelve pallbearers, unreal in grey and white, flitted about, silently took charge of the coffin heaped with white cloths and ribbons. Wailing, keening, groaning of guests in the yard. The house deserted, the courtyard empty. The long blue silk clan banner of the Chaos was raised by twenty-four bearers; through the door behind it trailed bearers of umbrellas, four-cornered moon fans, pennants and halberds. Pellets of flour for homeless ghosts spurted in the dust of the road.

In the dead girl's room Hai-t'ang played on little Nai's p'ip'a. Her hair hung loose. Face unrouged. She turned the instrument to this side and that.

On the same day captured sectarians were transported on carts from the market to the execution ground outside the town. Little Nai was already in her tomb when soldiers on heavy brown horses led the interminable procession of lurching miscreants through the wall into the sandy depression. Trumpetblasts from the marketplace. The Truly Powerless and the adherents of the White Waterlily, almost a hundred and fifty, wore wooden fetters on their legs. Kaoliang stalks were tied on their backs, wrapped in paper inscribed with the name of the criminal. The ox carts rumbled through the streets; the brothers smiled down, waved at the townspeople who passed up bowls of rice, cups filled with wine. They sang of the Western Paradise. From all sides people ran up, pointed out friends, acquaintances, wept and dared not curse the victors. Outside, a monstrous crowd pressed about the execution ground, held in check by riders with levelled swords and batons.

The ox carts moved on, the singing died away. In rows of twenty they hobbled one behind the other.

Now the executioner appeared behind them, naked to the waist. Hands grasping the hilt of the double-edged sword of judgement he swung it aloft so that he rose on tiptoe; smashing it down, bending double, knocked off balance by the force of the blow he severed head from torso.

Two perpendicular armthick founts of blood. The head rolled, blinked its eyes. The mouth snapped. The still kneeling torso

bounded forward, fell.

Soldiers in a wide ring aimed their bows, partly on the rebels, partly on the dark mass of people.

The report of their great victory brought the Governors of Chihli and Shantung the double-eyed peacock feather. Together with his decrees Ch'ien-lung sent letters in his own hand to these commanders, ordering the complete annihilation of rebels and heretics. How much weight Ch'ien-lung placed on a radical solution to the affair was shown by the appointments he made for the second phase of the campaign: at the side of the commanders he placed as advisers the President of the Court of Censors A-szu-ho and his most knowledgeable and learned son in law, Lawangdorchi. Furthermore he had large numbers of skilled Manchurian bowmen recruited in Solon and Kirin and immediately despatched to the theatre of war.

The defeated sectarians fled through southern Chihli, penetrated the mountain country of Shantung, gathered in several hill towns and received streams of newcomers. They descended in good order to the plain near the great Canal, which they crossed. Not quite two weeks after the events in Shanhaikwan, the Imperial troops drawn up to the north and east failed to prevent Wang Lun's followers from burning the town of Shou-chang in a blind passion of destruction, occupying two other county towns, finally besieging and taking the walled town of Tungch'ang. These places were right on the border with Chihli; their capture imperilled the border counties of Kuangp'ing and Taming. The Tsungtu received orders to defend this district.

Wang Lun lay in Tungch'ang on the Imperial Canal. All rebel troops were concentrated within a radius of two days march. Searing heat was followed by rainy days and storms. In the downpours peasants sowed their second crop. All trade in the region was at a standstill, traffic on the Canal halted. In a fury of activity the rebels put all surrounding villages to the torch. The approach of regular troops was hampered by the digging of great ditches, which

were then flooded with water from the Canal. They undermined the highway; barriers of bushes, bamboo and sand were thrown up at intervals, high as houses. Watchtowers that could be used to send smoke signals were demolished. Peasants whose property was left undisturbed performed soccage for the rebels.

Every morning Wang sat in the magistrate's yamen at Tungch'ang and held court. This last victory had refreshed his army; they lived war, weighed victory and defeat. Fortune and disaster depended on the black Ming banner: tenderly and with resolve the mass of warriors rallied to it.

During these days Wang Lun, seated on the k'ang in the courtroom of the yamen in Tungch'ang, presented to his lively followers a manifold image of cheerfulness, fiery passion and rapture. This had become familiar in him since the battle of Peking, but the condition now grew more pronounced. Some even asserted that in the midst of battle he became playful, snatched caps from the heads of enemy soldiers, stuck them on his Yellow Leaper, played with attackers like a cat, unconcerned at the progress of the fighting. How deeply he immersed himself in the usages of war was shown also by his free and easy manner with the women of the conquered town. Wang took what he wanted, while exercising strict discipline over the Truly Powerless. He frequently asked pardon of one or other of his friends for his dissipation: his behaviour might be ridiculous, but they shouldn't think badly of it. No one should take it into his head to think badly of it. The fact was, he felt really happy and confident; he hoped everything would go better soon. He avoided long discussions, avoided also conversation with Yellow Bell. Ngo, in charge at Shouchang, was filled with disgust and dread. Apart from official reports he and Wang had no contact with each other. Yellow Bell tried many times to seek an explanation from Wang. When Wang avoided him he went about oppressed, deeply grieved. He felt an obscure need to comfort Wang and protect him from something. So great was Yellow Bell's concern for Wang that he assigned a few dependable people to watch the strange man and report back to him. But he could not bear to hear their painful

reports and didn't know where to turn in his anguish and his pity.

Once a robber was brought before Wang in the yamen, a ragged scoundrel with a black look who had announced himself to peasants as a Truly Powerless and then, allowed in, had fallen on the unsuspecting fellows. Probably ten serious cases of robbery in the vicinity of Tungch'ang were his work. Wang asked the rawboned, no longer young man where he came from. Kneeling, the man twisted from side to side because during the night he had been made for several hours to kneel on thin chains to persuade him to confess. He sighed and asked to be set free; he was innocent, they'd mixed him up with someone else. Then seeing the judge's sombre gaze fixed on him he begged more importunately, stretched out his arms without answering Wang's questions. At last he said he was the son of a baker from Ch'angch'ing, had run away long ago because he wasn't suited to the bakery, he couldn't stand the heat, still couldn't; what a miserable fate. And then he told more lies until at last he spoke of the rebellion, how he sympathised with the sectarians; his mouth gaped when he explained how peasants had taken him for a pious brother. At the judge's command he had to stand up, supported by one of the attendants walk up and down the hall. With sidelong glances, knees often folding under him, the criminal observed the strange judge, who looked steadfastly back at him.

Wang was the same age as this fellow. If not for such and such a chance, his fate would have been the same: if not for Su-ko in Chi-nan, the misery up on Nank'ou and so on. In Chi-nan he'd gone about like this rogue who was now dragged up before him. Perhaps he hadn't made such a mess of things as this fellow, but once, once thin chains had been spread for his knees too.

"Turn round!" called Wang. "Keep him walking!"

A starved hulk with claws and arms like an ape, toothless mouth, scrawny shanks; as good a climber as he was a liar. His brother, his brother! A true word among all the lies: no Truly Powerless, but his brother.

Astonished Wang examined the man, couldn't take in enough of his rags, compared his hands with the rogue's; cast furtive glances at

the attendants to see if they noticed anything and found it strange that he sat up here and wasn't himself walking down there. No, they noticed nothing. Shouldn't they change places; wasn't the rogue to be envied? A curse on Su-ko and Nank'ou and everything that had forced him, torn him from his path. That anyone could have such a mouth and give such dirty looks!

When the criminal had been paraded up and down before the k'ang several times, Wang sent the happy man, bowing ceaselessly, unpunished back to prison.

At dusk Wang slipped into the prison yard, waved the guards away, sat down beside the grinning man, who hopped jauntily with shackled feet around his guest. Instead of interrogating him the judge began whispering to him in thieves' argot, so the prisoner at first shrank back in dumb astonishment, then responded cheerfully; he knew the Truly Powerless had drawn all sorts of people. The prisoner told droll stories about the singing brothers and even the crazy sisters; you wouldn't believe what cattle they were. They hatched an escape plan: rob the young solitary guard and once outside give the peasants who'd arrested the rogue something to remember them by. The rogue grew talkative and Wang listened; they smacked their thighs whispering. They had to sit in a huddle, the other prisoners came hobbling up and wanted to take part in the conversation. When Wang saw the man's obtrusive grimacing, the mutilated ears and nostrils, he all at once fell silent. He listened beyond his neighbour's hurried babbling, stared at the repulsive laughing unkempt heads. Nervously he rose, gave the criminal a few kind words, went into the street. His belly was frozen, his entrails heaved under his ribs. He hurried through the miry streets, in which scarcely a house door was lighted by a lantern; no patrols passed him by.

Don't be a criminal, no murders, no murders! How could anyone stand to commit a murder? Help the others, the mutilated, help them! Make their faces whole again! Nank'ou, resist, don't resist, mollify fate! Oh they were wicked and poor, they should come to him, then they wouldn't need to kneel on chains, lie in their filth,

suffer the long rod. His brother, his brothers, oh, so might he have become! No murders, no murders!

Next morning he gave orders that no one should be taken prisoner, and all the prisons emptied. Whoever among the criminals seized in the towns and the surrounding countryside declared himself for Wu-wei and ready to fight the Manchu was to be taken into the league. Pacing about in a lively unease he sent at midday for Yellow Bell, who came quickly.

Wang was waiting for the greybearded officer in front of his yamen, drew him into the house, grasped his hands without a word, embraced him. “If Ma No were still alive I’d send for him. You’d be there too. I have to tell you: last night I went to the wretched criminals in the gaol, but I can’t be a criminal any longer. I’ve still had yearnings that way sometimes, but it was wrong of me; it’s all old stories, you can’t relive your youth. I saw them in the gaol with their ears, noses missing; they spat at me; oh their looks were evil. You haven’t seen it, Yellow Bell. If one of them seeks you out, take a good look at him, then you’ll see I’m right: these are terrible, terrible people. I don’t know how anyone can sleep knowing such terrible people exist. Or how I brought myself once to murder a man. Oh, how unhappy they are, dear brother, how wretched. For murdering they go to gaol, for thieving they’re put in chains, flogged on the soles of their feet, their flesh is hacked off, ears burned away; and if they still live they go and rob again and don’t have the slightest idea what people want of them and how it’ll all end, why everything turns out so strangely. Mandarins there, there the Emperor, and there peasants and there criminals. Oh, how will it end? I conjured up my Wu-wei to help myself and them. It was supposed to go better that way, everyone on Nank’ou believed me, and it went well for so many. I don’t want to found a kingdom; I could kick myself, beat myself for being so heedless. The Wu-wei belongs to them and me, and I want us to be defeated.”

Yellow Bell removed Wang’s arm from his shoulder. They squatted together on a grubby rush mat by the door. Wang raised his arms to the wall: “Golden Buddhas ought to stand here, like they did in Ma

No's hut. The mild gods say everything and all of it good. Am I not once more on Nank'ou? I should like to be on Nank'ou again in gentleness and peace among my brothers."

Yellow Bell spoke in a trembling voice: "Have you changed so much, Wang? I feared for you. You might so easily be lost to us, I thought. I only thought it. In fact I'm happy for you and for me. What are you still waiting for?"

"Everything, dear brother! That's why I summoned you. What have I achieved, tell me, since I came down from Nank'ou? Has it been good? How am I to comprehend my life?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen everything you've done."

"The Wu-wei is good. No one can take that from me. Yellow Bell, I'm so afraid I've missed the Way. And the prisoners must all come with me, I have to care for them."

The other comforted Wang; he had to lead him around in the hall. Whatever the fate of their army, the Wu-wei wouldn't be defeated.

When they were seated again on the mat Wang soon fell silent, reproaching himself. After a pause Yellow Bell said softly, emerging from thought, that he wanted to tell his brother a story.

"In a village in the province of Chihli, it is said, there was once a family called Hsia. Listen quietly, Wang, it's a story that concerns you; be calm, dear brother, I shall give you my whole opinion and help you. The wife did her work in the fields, she went out early in the morning with the oxen and ploughed. She loved her husband. One morning before she got up, a loud whisper came from the wall: 'Your husband drinks wine in the tavern, he's playing about with the neighbour's daughter, thinking of making you his second wife.' The husband took her in his arms before she went to the fields and kissed her, she took both her children by the hand and they sat with her in the field. The oxen lowed, the woman played with the children and left the plough alone. At midday she strolled back home with the children, hugged her husband passionately, said she felt unwell. He had to untie his apron, put on his straw hat, and go to plough. She sat on a ruined grave behind the house, thought how a man's love was as brushwood and straw, cried pitifully and wondered how to

find comfort. With a determined expression she got up: ‘Do me a favour,’ she prayed to a Buddha, ‘save me.’

“In the dead of night she slipped down from the bed, swung her hands in farewell to her sleeping husband, stroked the gently breathing children, went out into the blue night over a great field of cabbages, and beyond a patch of fallow there was a mountain with steps cut into its steep flank by which, in certain months, Buddha could be reached. Others from the village must have climbed them this night, for as she went up she noticed fresh muddy footprints. She grew anxious because there was no end to the steps, and she feared she would lose her strength. She climbed and climbed; she overhauled others; all at once they slid down a short stretch and were then swept up and up without having to move their feet. On a platform the god sat with covered knees on a donkey. Two men with umbrellas, fans and lanterns were standing behind him holding the donkey on a halter, looked friendly. The god was smiling too. He had a narrow, finely drawn face with a goatee; his feet were tucked into his grey overgown. The woman stationed herself at the very end and waited with downcast eyes. When the men beckoned to her, she timidly crept closer into the lamplight. The god laid his thin hand, transparent as white jade in the light from the lanterns, on her hair and invited her to speak as soon as she had turned her back on him. She spoke haltingly, at which she too seemed to turn to transparent jade. She turned to face the god once more; he bent down, whispered a strange word in her ear, gently told her she could go back home now, everything would be fine. She put her hands up to her face, stood for a while until one of the two men led her to the steps.

“Now a whole summer passed, until the woman, who only occasionally went out to the fields, sat more and more on the grave, held her children to her and finally at the end of the harvest wandered off again to the steps. The climbing did her good; her feet hurt, which contented her. It seemed to her she climbed the whole night long. She was quite alone; it wasn’t the month for going to seek the god, but she stared boldly in the face of the stern old guard

up there and demanded to be let in; she had a right, no one could deny that. He led her sadly to the huge dark platform, said the god was there, she only had to speak. At once she cried out, gave her name, complained that the god hadn't helped her. He answered from far away, 'What do you want of me, woman?' She cried, 'You're not supposed to do the asking, I am. I wanted to die. But you gave me a word of comfort, kept me living. What do you want of me? That's why I've come to you. I've walked the whole night long to ask you this.' Hard, very close to her, the voice asked, 'Where are your children? Who tended your millet all summer through?'—'You must help me; my children are all right; I'm the only one who bothers with the millet.'—'The word did not help you because you were stubborn, woman.'—'You led me by the nose all summer long, you're a fine god.'—'Woman, you did not want to help your husband and yourself.' She burst out laughing: 'And you call that comfort?' She said not a word more. At a frown from the narrow forehead that loomed up close in front of her she crumpled together, whizzed like a jagged stone down into the abyss to where the steps began, where they penetrated the clouds. She dived past stars, like a homeless meteor amid the swarms whirled past the cloudgates. Have you understood me, Wang Lun?"

Who stood with head bowed and nodded. "I have received a sign and must accept it. I can't strike fate in the face. But believe me, Yellow Bell: resolutions don't help a man when he's not at peace. Resolutions can't change anything within him. Everything must come of itself."

Suddenly he lifted his grave face to Yellow Bell. "You rejoice over me. And I rejoice, because today I've received this sign and because it will go better with me now. I can feel that it will go better, dear brother. I begin to love mankind once more. What a muddle I've lived through; now I can stand upright again and go in peace and tend our beloved Wu-wei."

"Woe to us that we must tend it with swords and clubs, Wang. It is we alone who take the proper path that leads to the Summit of Supreme Bliss. I want to live only so long as I am able to defend our

good teaching. Last night I wanted to let you go with that criminal. I shan't forget tonight, when for the second time I have sat upon the pass of Nank'ou."

Yellow Bell held Wang's left hand, stroked it. "This is you, this is how I wanted to know you, dear brother. The fever has gone from you. Let them defeat us. Who can harm us?"

They rose. At Wang's request Yellow Bell accompanied him through the streets. When they had walked for an hour they came to a green meadow of low grass through which a shallow brook ran. Wang's stride was firm. Yellow Leaper hung from his neck on a string; it dangled gleaming over his blue shortsleeved smock. A pointed straw hat covered his brow, which was slashed by a red scar; masterful eyes in a dark tanned face squinted into the sun. Yellow Bell's long legs took great steps; he walked bent; grey smock and grey trousers, strawsandalled like Wang. Hollow temples, deepset eyes that flashed black, flapping beard. Larks and finches sang above them.

Wang pointed to the town wall, smiling. "We shan't come to Nank'ou today."

They stretched out by the brook, were silent. Yellow Bell murmured, "I shan't have many more such days. I shan't lie much longer in the kaoliang. I was outside Chengting with Ma No. The sun shone fair over the lama monastery. Salt boilers knocked at the gate, we were startled. Liang-li sat beside me."

"You've never forgotten this sister, brother Yellow Bell."

The officer fended this off with his arm. "When the sun shines, Yellow Bell thinks of Liang-li from Chengting. When it doesn't shine, he wonders why, and why he has forgotten Liang-li."

"She died in the Mongolian town."

"Wang, she's in the Western Paradise. Beyond the white clouds in the west I discern at times a fine, clever face."

Hooting, rattling from the distant houses. Ceaseless twittering from the birds, black animated clusters high overhead. Wang, reclining, drew in his legs, flung himself around, knelt up and observed the birds swooping and soaring, and the little brook. He

took off his straw hat, removed his neck from the noose of the swordstring; then he stuck the sword in the soft earth, jammed his hat on the hilt, swung his arms and placed his legs as if for a runup. “On your feet, brother Yellow Bell. I’m going to jump.”

With one leap he was on the other side of the brook. “Now I’m on Nank’ou. Ma No is doing what I want to do. Everything is going badly. I must jump again.”

He swished down beside his sword; the hat was blown off by the draught. “Now in the Lower Reaches. A beautiful time, Yellow Bell. The dyke, the Yellow River, the Yangtze; I had a wife. The Wu-wei wended its way to me, I’m not there yet, I can’t follow so quickly. Slaughter, my yellow sword! And now—”

He crossed the little stream with a third leap. “Where am I? On Nank’ou again with you, Yellow Bell. The sign was good. The criminals were good. I’ve come back from the Lower Reaches, I’m home again in Chihli. Come across to me here, dear brother, bring my Yellow Leaper with you, for there’s a fight to be fought.” Yellow Bell stood beside him.

They put arms around each other’s shoulders, gazed into the trickling, glittering water. “The Nai-ho,” Yellow Bell laughed. They held each other tighter. Wang lowered his head, sighed softly: “The Nai-ho. It has to end this way.” Yellow Bell too shivered slightly: “I hoped for a good fate for us. I leave the Flowering Middle with reluctance.”

On the evening of this day of the three leaps two ladies of the town had themselves carried to Wang. One elegant slender lady came first into the silent yamen, where Wang remained seated on the mat. The lid of her left eye drooped mostly; now and then big white spots could be seen on the eyeball. A plump, very pretty lady followed, who carried herself with less assurance than the elegant one. The first gave her name as P’ei, the other Ying. Settling themselves on the mat they waited for Wang’s greeting. The elder remained unruffled even when the man asked harshly what they wanted. They came from the Vermilion City. They’d had to flee even before the seige. They offered their services to the sectarians.

Madam P'ei described in broad terms what had befallen them, ended by explaining that she was in a position to get back into the Vermilion City and bring about the deaths of the Manchu leaders by sorcery. Wang had heard something of this sorceress's deeds. He stayed silent for a while, not moving. Then he climbed down, thanked the ladies, asked them to leave their address, sent them away with two soldiers for their protection.

That evening the affair left Wang fretful. First he sent for Yellow Bell, then the messenger had to be recalled. He wanted to come to a decision alone. In the courtyard of the yamen he paced about. This was a new sign. Unexpected end of the Manchus. Ought he seize the chance, must he not? No Nai-ho yet! But his initial reluctance returned. There was something unbearable about the proposal. It was revolting, the whole thing was senseless, it came from without, wasn't a sign, it simply disturbed the course. What he experienced with Yellow Bell at the little brook was final, and no one should interfere in it. No murders. The paths all lay straight ahead.

And before night fell he sent four soldiers to the ladies, who led them under the watchful eye of an officer out of the town. They were threatened with the rod if ever they turned up again among the Truly Powerless.

It's decided, completed, Wang rejoiced. He went to sleep happy. In a dream he stood beneath a sycamore, clung to its trunk. Above his head the green treetop spread broad and high so that as the heavy boughs sank he was completely enveloped and buried in cool leaves, invisible to the many people who walked by and delighted in the inexhaustible growth.

After the entire provincial army of Ch'en Yuan-li, Tsungtu of Chihli, had marched up to Tungch'ang, the sectarians were goaded out to a fight and defeated. Ch'en Yuan-li then pulled back. The Tsungtu of Shantung, with Banner troops under Chao Hui, took up a position on the west bank of the Imperial Canal in the path of the fleeing sectarians. The Tsungtu's general engaged in a heated skirmish with

the fearless rebels, who fled across the Canal, prepared for further battle in the plain outside the town of Linch'ing to the east of the Canal. Here unfolded the great battle in the course of which the remainder of the sectarians were driven into the town. They had taken care to secure the walls and towers, with the result that the regular troops were compelled to a siege of Linch'ing.

The sectarians numbered no more than Ma No's band, barely fifteen hundred people including many women. Wang Lun and Yellow Bell had suffered only light sabre wounds. Ngo's right arm was mangled up to the shoulder. The noble man held himself upright with difficulty, practised for the final battle by swinging a club in his left hand.

Brothers and sisters clung together in an indescribable intimacy. Their friends from the White Waterlily seemed to have vanished; the recent calamities had led to their complete absorption into the Truly Powerless. Pious hymns of the journey to the Western Paradise echoed from the walls. A joyous mood surged.

Among the women were many who believed themselves unable to endure the horrors of another battle. It was these who solemnly hanged themselves in the marketplace on the second day of the siege.

Some brothers grew confused in the spirit when it became apparent that the town was now encircled by uncountable hordes of troops and annihilation loomed. They danced naked in the streets, exulted in marrowjarring voices that they knew the true, the good Way and were dancing along it. Stealthily they slipped across squares, sank to the ground with eyes closed and rasped in delirium. Several of these men cut their arms and lips with sharp stones like Fo-priests; eyes rolling white grasped dreaming women by the hands, and hard on the heels of ecstasy, in ecstasy, rutting embraces followed that no one condemned.

A small number of the immured looked sidelong, distrusting, spitefully at the others, could not resign themselves to the final rapture, wanted somehow to escape, betray the sect. These it was, many of them weeping in the courtyards, who clambered on the

walls at all hours, whimpering grievously followed the movements of the Imperials. Then they paid heed again to everyone, thrust themselves into the thronging marketplace, struggled to draw over their own twisted faces the festive calm of the others.

Here and there an individual fate was swiftly consummated. Ngo had sought the Wu-wei to find peace for himself. It tormented him, when the persecutions began, that he had to participate in the leadership. He went into battle with only half a heart and was glad of the benumbing turmoil. His revulsion against the Vermilion City thickened to hatred for the Manchus who forced him to battle. Hardly any among the Truly Powerless harboured such unbridled hatred for the Emperor as former Captain Ngo. Left alone, freed of his hate now that defeat loomed, he sat in Linch'ing. Dully he heard the trite songs of his friends, saw them from a great distance walking away from him. Memories awoke of the Emperor, of wanderings with Ma No, his beloved boy, and all without emotion. His right arm was ruined; he practised with the left and observed that it was all the same if the club struck a post, an Imperial, or his own body. Seeking conversation and the company of brothers he could not find himself again. He asked himself if it wouldn't have been just as well to go on loving his boy and new boys, and was taken so violently by this notion that he melted in dreamy tenderness, approached this captivating vanished figure, begged its forgiveness for staying away so long, bringing no perfumes, no sweets. Whole days he passed in this trance. Yellow Bell came across him weak and in a high fever. The officer parted shaken from the sick man: he had the look of one diving already into the final darkness. As Ngo lay close to death in the bare room that had been found for him, in between the frosts and the flashing colours he felt for the delicate knees and ears of his boy, his clenched jaws barring entry to the rustling Wu-wei, tried now sceptically, now impatiently to find his balance, wandering, stammering, quite still.

The sect, decimated, completely exhausted, was lost. It was granted to the remnant to see through the last days together with Wang Lun. Among these sectarians the name Nank'ou meant almost

nothing. When Wang Lun told them he had returned to them after a great journey from Nank'ou through the Lower Reaches to Linch'ing, they knew well who he was and that it was worthwhile to have lived for the Wu-wei and to enter the Western Paradise.

In the first hour of the afternoon when they were driven into the town Wang Lun, bleeding at the neck, dripping with sweat, trembling pulled Yellow Bell into the empty courtyard of a house, embraced him violently, stuttered beside himself, with blazing eyes, "Brother, we are lost. It's the end. Brother, the gates are closed. Who do I thank for that?"

Yellow Bell groaned, "We are lost."

"Do you think so? I'm ready to die. What I said in Tungch'ang is still true: there's no other end. The Nai-ho is black as mud. But I am with you, with you all, the only thing I've ever loved in my whole life is here: Nank'ou. I've come back to you. The gates are closed. We can pray, we can rejoice. All of a sudden we are free."

In the following days Wang opened up completely. He climbed without cease through streets and squares. He strove to know every single member of the sect, let them relate their fates. He wept with them over fallen friends, for all of whom collective offerings were burned in the marketplace, forgave the Imperials they had been forced to fight against. The time when all should walk the pure Way was not yet come. Only through yielding and meekness could the terrors of life, the iron blows of sorrow be turned aside.

At the devotions in the marketplace the barefoot man, bareheaded, climbed onto the planks of a market stall. He told of his wanderings in the Lower Reaches and how it had done him no good, of the thousands of joyous brothers and sisters that Ma No had led to the K'unlun Mountains. He named many of them, described them. At other times, and this with great urgency, he praised fate. He found again the words from Nank'ou: how small men were, how quickly everything passed and how little use noise was. The Imperials and Manchus might be victorious; how would it help them? Who lives in fever conquers lands and loses them; it is a confusion, nothing more. Wolves and tigers are evil beasts; who takes them as his emblem

devours and is devoured. Men must think as the earth thinks, water thinks, the forests think: without fuss, slow, still; accepting, conforming themselves to every change and influence. They, who were truly powerless against good fate, had been forced to do battle. The pure teaching must not be eradicated, blotted away like bad ink. Now all fighting was over for them, must be over. Clubs, swords, scythes would be taken up just once more. Wu-wei was buried in the hearts of the Hundred Families. When they were gone it would spread in a stealthy, miracle-teeming manner, while they strolled among the clouds of the Western Paradise and sank up to their loins in sweetscented ambergris. They were surrounded by corpses; shades and skeletons grasped at them, the strongest sorcery couldn't overpower such evil. Only Wu-wei could, that separated life from death with such a simple stroke. The sages of old knew as much. Be weak, endure, bow down to fate—that was the true Way. Cleaving to events, water to water, cleaving to the rivers, the land, the air, always brother and sister, love—that was the true Way.

He spoke of the dream that appeared to him night after night: he stood beside the tree, at first it was like a sycamore. Gradually the tree began to grow around him, so slender and at the same time so bushy, hanging over him voluptuous as a weeping willow, enclosing him like a green coffin. Sometimes when he awoke the dream was still in his head and then he imagined that the slender trunk had twined like a creeper around his legs, his body and arms, so he couldn't extricate himself from the watery pith and was completely sucked up into that luxuriant plant which everyone rejoiced to see.

Ecstatics foamed and clapped when Wang spoke in this vein. It frequently happened that crowds gathered, crowded around the gates with a hazy notion of going out to preach to the enemy and winning them over. They urged Wang, urged Yellow Bell to let them hold a festival. And one day the joyous sounds of a festival fluted through the town. They hauled the carved image of a goddess, the Queen of the Western Heaven, from a sumptuous temple, carried it to an open space beyond the houses, burned incense, leapt. Brothers walked barefoot over beds of glowing coal spread in front of the

goddess, faces turned to the goddess laughing, triumphant. Brothers and sisters endlessly begged Wang to send spirits to her that would cast themselves down before her and praise her on behalf of all who honoured the holy Wu-wei. Five times five men and women dragged beams and loose boards over the beds of coal. And as the wood blazed up, they trampled in glee one behind the other, one over the other amid the frantic shouts of the crowd, yelping into the swelling flames before the gentle image, like chicks under a mother hen's wing.

Chao Hui was commander in chief of a force that outnumbered the enemy by almost ten to one. The arrival of those Manchurian archers whose deployment the Emperor had ordered was expected daily. A young officer was attached to the general's Banner regiment: Lao-hsü, the son of Chao and Hai-t'ang. As she first drove Chao Hui out to avenge their sweet daughter, so Hai-t'ang then drove out this elegant idler, who was rapidly changed by his sister's death. He hardly had need of his mother's prodding.

Linch'ing consisted of an old and a new town. Only the new town was strongly walled and surrounded by an earthen rampart. The wall of the old town was not quite complete, only two of its watchtowers usable. Before the archers arrived Yinchitu, a captain of Chao's Banner, took two hundred men, forced the eastern gate of the new town, stormed the almost undefended wall overpowered the badly armed rebels. Only forty Imperials were killed in this surprise attack, while two hundred and thirty corpses of sectarians and townspeople were counted.

The next day a red sun glowed. As it sank, Wang gave orders for everyone in the old town who had a weapon to take arms and abandon houses which were difficult to barricade. They were to take up positions in the largest houses in the narrowest streets. Small bands of archers and slingers were to place themselves at particular points along the walls as soon as night fell. Yellow Bell saw to the deployment with cold efficiency; his calmness removed all fear from the moment.

As soon as it grew dark someone came to the house where Wang

was lodging; when a man opened the door at his knock, handed over a vase and said it was not to be opened. After closing the door the man stood there irresolute, and before he could ask a question the messenger had vanished. Doubtfully he bolted the door, took the sealed porcelain vase, of no great weight, to Wang's room, placed it on the mat. Shortly afterwards Yellow Bell arrived at the house to speak to Wang. He went into the room and saw Wang seated by the oil lamp at a table, his back to the door. He seemed to be reading. Then the gatekeeper called from the yard that Yellow Bell was to go up: Wang Lun was on the first floor with some brothers, asking for him. Frightened, Yellow Bell stumbled up the stairs. From the room above he could hear loud talking and noises. Wang was handing out spears and short daggers. Yellow Bell called to Wang, who let a dagger drop when he saw the officer's horrified face, rushed downstairs with him, went softly through the door. The apparition was still reading at the table. Wang called to it, it turned, gazed at Wang, whose hands clutched his throat, out of his own eyes, moved towards the mat, vanished. The two men edged nearer. The vase stood there, sealed. Yellow Bell held Wang, who was tottering, by the shoulder. "Yellow Bell, do you know what it was?"

Yellow Bell said nothing, closed his eyes. Wang was trembling. "It means I must die tomorrow."

In haste, distraught, Wang told the gatekeeper to take the vase away, carefully. After staring blankly into space for a while he went back up with Yellow Bell.

The assault on the gates began shortly before sunrise, beginning with the new town. Bold, powerful Yinchitu was the first to storm into the town through the battered gate; he sought Wang Lun, to strangle him with his bare hands. Close behind ran Lao-hsü in a redplumed helmet, shieldless, in each fist a long two-edged knife. The southern gate succumbed not long after to the provincial troops, who had now been joined by the archers; as soon as Yinchitu entered the town through the east gate, all defenders had withdrawn from the walls into the lanes and houses. On the southern wall stood a cast iron cannon, which the attackers filled with the blood of a

virgin they had stabbed the night before the assault, and shot into the town to cleanse the air of the spirits of fallen rebels. Women rushed at the soldiers from alleyways with a horrible jubilant shrieking; they blocked streets leading to the rebels: clumped possessed flesh that had to be hacked away. Flames from burning houses jogged in from the edge of the town.

Furious street fighting set in. The brothers would not allow themselves to be trapped in the houses; they sallied forth from house after house. The town quivered death. The streets filled with choking soldiers. Fresh troops poured in continually over the walls, ground their teeth and could not be restrained. From the centre of the town among the furious roaring, the long sharp screaming, a raucous bawling and whooping swelled from the rebels, sank, surged again.

In a street, planted with the corpses of women, that led to the marketplace, brothers saw as they opened their house doors to enter the fray Wang Lun running with great leaps from the marketplace, bareheaded, sword slung over his left shoulder. He raced past, his sweatdrenched face hollow and unrecognizable, eyes empty, Yinchitu and Lao-hsü pursuing at the head of archers and lancers. The brothers held back the onslaught. Wang disappeared into a large empty house at the end of the street. A small group of sectarians with daggers ran along the houses, threw themselves on the archers in front of the last doorway. Yinchitu, covered by Lao-hsü, heaved open the door with a groan. Wang was panting by the courtyard wall. Yinchitu parried Wang's thrust with his sword; they struggled; the captain wrested Yellow Leaper from the rebel leader's grasp. A dozen sectarians succeeded in gaining entry to the yard. They felled Lao-hsü with their daggers, freed Wang and scrambled with him to the upper floor of the house. Here were piled planks of camphor wood. They barricaded the stairs with a jumble of planks, cupboards and tables. While archers from Kirin shot arrow after arrow in through the windows, they started a fire and were burned before the first soldier could climb the stairs.

Yinchitu stormed down the street after rebels, brandishing Yellow Leaper about his head; he struck down twenty brothers and sisters.

In the southern part of the town Yellow Bell held his house longest. When it was set alight with burning arrows, he scrambled with his forty men out into the street. He fought warily against the Imperial Bannermen, who retreated when they recognized the officer they had revered in the barracks. The whole town had fallen to the jubilant regulars, and still he fought, protecting himself with a tall shield, behind the yamen wall. A lance in the throat spun him around; his last companions were felled by club blows. The hundred men and women who had gathered weaponless in the marketplace ready to be massacred were surrounded, bound, dragged by twos to the camp outside the burning town.

Government measures winding up this affair lasted a month. During this time the prisoners were transported to Peking; Ch'ien-lung interrogated the greater part of them personally, to ascertain connivance by officials, dilatoriness in persecution. Then the brothers and sisters were sentenced before a large crowd outside Peking in accordance with the law against heresy. Their families and the families of known rebels were banished to the Ili and Mongolia, some two thousand people in all. The village of Hunkang-ts'un was burned to the ground, the remains of Wang's parents exhumed, dismembered, all residents of the village driven out, their scanty chattels confiscated. The corpses of the rebels rotted in the streets of Linch'ing, poisoned the air until the few remaining inhabitants turned to the Prefect. Then a decree of Ch'ien-lung ordered the carcasses to be gathered and piled outside the wall near the Canal. Two wide shallow graves were dug for the men and women on the riverbank, at a spot where evil spirits congregated. Into these were tipped barrow loads of cadavers; debris from the burned out houses and charred beams were piled on top. From the Canal these two long grave mounds and rubble heaps looked like the backs of two giant moles scrabbling out of the earth.

Ch'ien-lung basked. He made it known to the State Council that he had named Chia-ch'ing, the son who had reconciled him with his

ancestors, as his heir. Officers, generals, high officials, advisers who had taken part in the suppression of the rebellion received titles of honour, estates. On the day of the Thanksgiving Festival, Ch'ien-lung inscribed in a firm hand in the inner hall of the K'ungfu-tzu Temple: "Had K'ungfu-tzu been here, he would not have proceeded more thoroughly than I."

While the corpses—the charred body of Wang, who had been born a fisherman's son, lived a criminal, founded the Wu-wei for the wretched of the Eighteen Provinces and so fallen under the laws against heresy, the pierced body of Yellow Bell, the noblest and gentlest of the brothers, whoo received the spear with his soul at peace, surging tenderly towards a lovely white cloud, Ngo the weakest of all, slowly crushed by his misery, the numberless brothers and sisters who had blossomed under the peace of Wu-wei—while the corpses still rotted in the quiet streets and in the houses of Linch'ing, Hai-t'ang travelled on a great ship of mourning, surrounded by her women, along the coast to her southern homeland.

Chao Hui, the broken victor, was held fast by Ch'ien-lung at Court. Hai-t'ang wanted to travel alone. She told Chao Hui when he sold his house in Shanhaikwan that he should take a concubine, have a son by her.

Soft autumn came. The ship glided along the southern coast. From the towns music shrilled; harvest processions thudded in the fields. Junks streaked playfully over the dark water. Hai-t'ang still as death on the broad heavy ship. She did not journey directly to her home; the ship anchored off the island of P'ut'o-shan. Hai-t'ang wanted to go before the merciful goddess Kuan-yin, secure for herself the prayers of the most pious monks.

Sunny jags of granite peaks. Dreaming tucked-in landscapes. Slender fan palms with clear voices. Camellias a hundred thousand. Transpiring ponds, floating lilies. Between hedges, behind stony paths a temple at the foot of the cliff. Stretched out sky.

Supported by two women Hai-t'ang rustled along the path in grey voluminous clothes, grey veil over her face. They went through the

entrance hall, across the vast terrace and the platform in front of the prayer hall. Hai-t'ang's eyes tolerated the reliefs on the steep breastwork of the terrace, extolling childish love. In front of the altar the eternal flame smoked in its carved wooden niche. Curtains, patchwork carpets, standards, drums, incense.

Kuan-yin huge at the back. She sat there by the wall in a white robe, left hand delicately raised; her face was golden; she wore a crown of five lotus leaves; her blue hair was fastened with a diadem. She sat on the marble plinth slender of hip, stronglegged, head leaning slightly back; violet bib; white silk flowed over her narrow shoulders. The eyelids beneath black brows were lowered but the yellowish lashes, thin, slightly parted lips seemed to flutter gently. In such mildness she kept her silence; in such absorption she heard and gave. Tablets and banners praised her: "Kuan-yin, great friend. Her merciful boat conveys all across. Her grace is vast as the waves of the sea. She arose for everyone. A mother's heart. Her golden body will not perish."

Monks in brown robes pressed foreheads to the ground before her. Murmurs, tinkling, a soft chant. Hai-t'ang crumpled her veil; breathed gustily and smiled, gazed away over the monks.

It was late evening. The island was vanishing in the darkness. Bearing lanterns a hundred monks left their cells and chapels in procession along stony paths. Hai-t'ang had donated a vast sum in order that they should pray for her to the goddess. She sat at a bend in the path under a boulder of granite. The procession murmured past, arms crossed, cowl after cowl. She paid the monks, an endless stream. Proud, triumphant she surveyed the boundless throng: she must succeed in overpowering the goddess. Peace, peace was what she wanted. Wang Lun had taken both children from her; vengeance had failed, and even had it succeeded would have been of no use. Peace for herself, peace for her dead children, endless, ever-renewed floggings for Wang Lun! It grew calm in her as the torches vanished amid chanting into the temple. She gulped the warm air. The goddess had better look out, now the monks were crowding in on her, struggling with her—for Hai-t'ang. Her maids got to their feet.

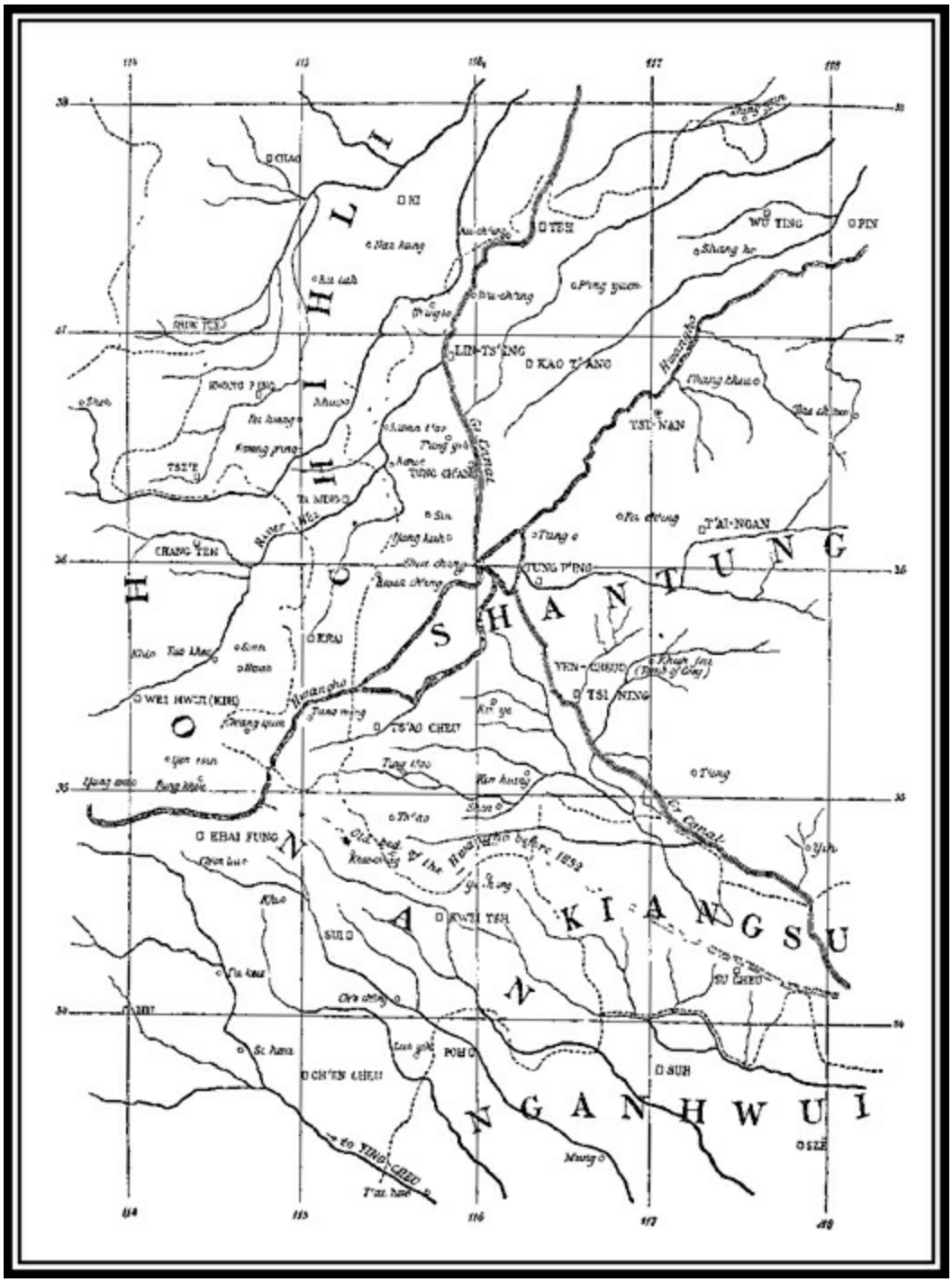
Hai-t'ang returned to the ship for the night.

The next evening she sat once more under the boulder of granite. The torches swayed past. In the darkness she turned her triumphant face, contorted with hate, towards the dark temple. She shook her arms over the heads of the monks.

On the third evening she sent her maids away. The murmur of the procession filled the paths. Hai-t'ang stared into the dazzling torchlight. She fell down, screamed, tore her breast. The goddess was stronger; the monks could not prevail. They could pray and pray and pray. Who had the strength? Who could save her?

Then it seemed to her the monks were back already. There was a rustling. A gleam played over the ground. In the light of the newly risen moon slenderhipped Kuan-yin walked past her, mother-of-pearl white. The diadem on her curly hair flashed grassgreen when she turned her inclined head. She smiled, looked at Hai-t'ang, said, "Hai-t'ang, leave your breast alone. Your children sleep beside me. Be calm, do not resist, oh, do not resist."

Hai-t'ang looked again into the green trailing moonlight. She sat up, pressed shovelled hands over her cold face. "Be calm, not resist. Have I the strength?"



A map of the principal sites, as it appears in de Groot.

Appendix

The Insurrection of Wang Lun, in 1774

J. J. M. de Groot

Alfred Döblin's inspiration for The Three Leaps of Wang Lun *was the following passage in Jan Jakob Maria de Groot's* Sectarianism and Religious Persecution in China: A Page in the History of Religions, *Volume II (1904). De Groot (1854-1921) was a Dutch missionary, historian of religion, and Sinologist who taught at Leiden University and Humboldt University of Berlin.*

After the emperor had thus sent out his satrap of Chihli against the White Yang hierarch and his community, there are among the edicts of the *Shing hiun* (*Sh. h.*), for about thirty months, none which relate to persecution. This silence, as in so many other instances, will have to be simply ascribed to the fact that this Compendium is merely a selection of edicts, never enabling us to grasp the full extent of the persecutions. Indeed, if we admit that the mandarinate raged not in that lapse of time, it must remain a riddle why, quite suddenly in 1774, the decrees come forward with news of the outbreak of a rebellion of the White Yang and the White Lotus sects, under the headship of a member of the same Wang tribe that the heresiarch belonged to, and on the borders of the same Chihli province in which he had his see.

Persecution naturally provokes self-defence. And self-defence may readily become open revolt where the defensive party is an organized religion with chieftains and leaders, zealots and fanatics all ready for self-sacrifice and martyrdom. We have seen how the persecuted Lotus church once rose in arms against the house of

Yuen, and brought it to an untimely downfall. We saw the same religion play its armed part in the overthrow of the Ming dynasty. Should then the present Imperial family—which so sharply opposed Sectarianism, persecuting it certainly not less cruelly or with less antiheretical fanaticism than those two preceding dynasties—never have to keep account with religious rebels?

No nation rises in arms against its rulers without serious reasons. Least of all can unprovoked revolt be expected of so unmartial a people as the Chinese are, timid and peaceful on the whole, merely used to handling plough and tool, never trained in arms, never using a sword or spear, hardly even ever possessing any. So we cannot but conclude that the religious revolt of 1774 must have been preceded by a horrible time of terrorism, panic, agony and exasperation, a time in which the people saw their revered religious leaders and elders, their parents, children, brethren and sisters dragged into the dungeons, beaten, tortured, strangled, beheaded, cut to pieces alive, castrated and banished, their homes pounced upon by police and soldiery, plundered and emptied; a time in which hundreds of harmless religionists saw prices set on their heads and were hunted down as dangerous beasts, everywhere imperiling also their brethren among whom they sought refuge and protection.

Wang Lun, the man who has for ever affixed his name to the revolt, was an influential sectary in the department of Yen-cheu. There, in the district Sheu-chang, thus relates Wei Yuen in the last section of the eighth chapter of his *Shing wu ki*, he occupied himself with healing the sick by making them suppress their respiration, which art he had borrowed from the heretical sect of the Pure Water. He also gave lessons in boxing. His followers daily increased in Shantung, and the Prefect of Sheu-chang, Shen Ts'i-i, had him arrested. But then, on the 28th day of the eighth month (Oct. 3), the rebels stormed the city, and also successively took possession of the more northern district-cities of T'ang-yih and Yang-kuh; and after that they marched up against the chief city of the Tung-ch'ang department on the Great Imperial Canal, and against Lin-ts'ing, a place even more important, on the confluence of the Wei and the

Great Canal, which by its situation commanded the rice-transport from the south to Peking. This was a direct attack upon the most vital point of the dynasty; the victualing of the Imperial family, the Court, the central Government, the troops and the population in the Metropolis being thus intercepted.

The emperor, who was at Jehol at that time, deemed it necessary to send the Grand Secretary or High Chancellor Shu Hoh-teh to the scene of the insurrection as Military Commander-in-Chief and Plenipotentiary. In co-operation with the Imperial son-in-law Lah-wang-tao-'rh-tsi and the President of the Censorate O Szĕ-hoh, and aided by select Manchu archers from Solon and Kirin, he was "to pacify those districts by sweeping the evil clean away to the last remains," in other words, to exterminate the rebels to the last. The Viceroy of Chihli, Cheu Yuen-li, already known to us, received instructions to defend his departments of Kwang-p'ing and Taming, bordering on the revolting region, while Yao Lih-teh, Director General of the Hwangho, was charged with the defence of Tung-ch'ang.

The badly organized rebel troops were not proof against such force. In a decree of the 10th day of the ninth month (Oct. 14), and in another, dated ten days later (*Sh. h.* 49), we read already of the slaughter of rebels by Su Tsih, Governor of Shantung, by Yao Lih-teh, by Wei Yih, Brigade General of the troops at Yen-cheu, and by volunteers in the Kwan-t'ao district. The last mentioned decree empowered the Governor of Shantung to bestow liberal rewards on all braves for the extermination and capture of rebels. The first victory of any importance was gained by Wei Yih, with three hundred men; T'ang-yih fell into his hands, and with eight hundred troops he defeated the rebel army a second time, and released Su Tsih, besieged in Lin-ts'ing, that is to say, in the New City, while the Old one was in the power of the rebels. Wei Yuen says this was a large place with earthen walls no less than thirty or forty li in circumference, embracing many myriads of dwellings. From this enormous stronghold the insurgents attacked the New City, and found that the cannon on the walls did them no harm at all. But the

Imperialists cleverly remedied this evil by exorcising the guns with the blood of a naked woman and a virgin, and with a fowl and a dog.

On the 14th of that month, Wei Yih, together with Koh T'ukheng, Military Commander in the city of Teh-cheu, north of Lin-ts'ing, was seen approaching the besieged town with a thousand men. This tempted a part of the garrison to a rash sally, but they were worsted by the besiegers and fled to Tung-ch'ang, where by Imperial command they were all beheaded. Attacked both on the Teh-cheu and the Tung-ch'ang side, harassed on the other by the Chihli forces, and assailed in the west from Kwan-t'ao, the insurgents had a hot time of it. A disastrous defeat was inflicted upon them on the western banks of the canal by the General of Chihli, Wan Ch'ao-hing, on which occasion their floating bridge was burned. On the 23rd, Shu Hoh-teh's own army appeared on the scene, defeated the rebels under the walls of the Old City, and with great slaughter drove them within the walls. Then the east-gate was stormed by Shu Hoh-teh, and the city given over to fire and sword. Yin Tsi-t'u, an officer of the Imperial Body-guard who had fought with much bloody success at the northern gate, now went to find Wang Lun. He pulled down the walls of a large house into which the latter had retired, and with his own hand seized him. But a dozen rebels rushed out, released their headman, mounted with him to the top story, set fire to the building, and all perished in the flames. That gallant officer then continued his heroic feats of that day by slaying the streets some dozens of female rebels. The younger brother of Wang Lun, Wang P'oh by name, with the insurgent commanders Fan Wei, Meng Ts'an, Wang King-lung and others, were caught alive and sent in cages to Peking. More than a thousand of their relations and clansfolk were put to death. About 7,000 families, altogether numbering about 40,000 persons, who had fled for their lives, now returned. In one month the rebellion was quenched, and the empty grain fleet could safely sail south, to fetch new food-supplies for Peking and the Court.

So far Wei Yuen's account of the insurrection. The Old City had

been the scene of most tremendous slaughter and havoc. An Imperial decree of the 12th day of the tenth month (Nov. 15) declared (see *Sh. h.* 82) that, according to Shuh Hoh-teh's own report, the dead bodies lay in piles everywhere, and blocked up the streets. A statesman suggested to the Throne that, unless they were removed, infectious diseases might break out amongst the 4,000 families re-settled in the city. So the emperor ordered that the Commanders-in-chief should have two pits dug near the riverbank, one for the male and one for the female corpses; after these had been thrown therein and covered up with the debris of the burned houses, the remaining ruins and rubbish should be piled up over them, so as to form grave-mounds not high and conspicuous like whales, but just large enough to warn and intimidate the people. Foreigners who visit Lin-ts'ing, go and behold with your own eyes these hideous trophies, eloquent witnesses of Chinese religious liberty, raised on human bones! They lie in the very region where Confucius lived and labored, not very far from the place where his grave is found, and his descendants live in the enjoyment of special protection and favor on the part of a State worshipping him as the founder and patron divinity of its political and ethical wisdom.

The demon of war sent out by the emperor, had done his work unhampered; but the imperial bloodthirstiness was not yet satiated. Many indeed have been slain, thus he exclaims triumphantly in a decree of the 4th of the tenth month (Nov. 7), "but the arch rebel has managed to escape from being carved alive into one-inch pieces; in faith, it makes Me grind My teeth. But the sons of that culprit Wang Lun are numerous; they must of course be quickly sought and arrested at once, in order to undergo for him this severest of all punishments" (*Sh. h.* 256). Shu Hoh-teh has reported to Us that Wang King-lung and other insurgent chiefs have been forwarded to Peking in cages; their arrival may be expected any day, and they may then be carefully examined by Ourselves. That Plenipotentiary has already 1,372 culprits in his power. All those amongst them who held official appointments among the insurgents, or actually fought on the rebel side, shall without mercy be put to death. Those who

rendered services to the rebels, or who were present at the fights without taking part therein, shall be exiled for ever to Ili, Kirin, Heh-lung-kiang and other regions, there to be given to the troops for slaves, or else they shall be banished to the inland regions where infectious diseases prevail. But the ignorant who were forced to side with the insurgents and had no chance of deserting their ranks, or young men carried off by the rebels, may, if thought advisable, be set free, or if their case is of a more serious nature, they shall undergo a chastisement by way of correction. The Governor of Shantung likewise reports that on all sides he has captured very many people. With regard to the chief rebels among these, he shall act in the same manner as prescribed above; he shall take good measures, lest any such delinquents slip through his nets. But the sectaries of both sexes who at T'ang-yih welcomed the rebels on their knees, "positively belong to the criminals of the abominable kind." Those who took the lead on that occasion shall be put to death for a warning example; the remainder against whom sufficient proof of guilt can be found, shall be exiled, without it being necessary to pursue thorough investigation. For a long time the Lotus sect has been propagated in Shantung. Wang P'oh has confessed that Wang Lun's teacher, Chang Ki-ch'ing from Yang-kuh, is dead; let his body be exhumed from its grave, and his wife and brothers who are traveling about be seized and subjected to a severe examination; and let the same be done to his teacher Yuen Kung-p'u from Tung-o. All the branches of that heretical religion shall be tracked and searched; they who for some long time have occupied themselves with heresies shall more particularly be hunted up, "lest any remnant of the evil be left in existence." At the same time, however, it should be borne in mind, that "although the heretical religions must most decidedly be searched out and put a stop to, they who have entered such a religion are not necessarily altogether rebels." Hence they who have done so in consequence of seduction, if they change their mind and apostatize, need not positively be persecuted more rigorously than the general members of the sect-branches. "But if you are unable to strive for the extermination, root and branch, of the remainder of

the rebels and the heretical religions, then neither can you fully realize the sentence I have inscribed with My own hand in the posterior hall (of the temple of Confucius): 'If Chung-ni (Confucius) were here, he would not do it more thoroughly than Myself.' Shu Hoh-teh, fathom the meaning of these words, and realize My intentions in the best way you can. Be not lax or lenient, be not negligent!"

Eloquent words indeed, by which this supreme Confucian persecutor portrays himself! His delight in the sacred slaughter of heretics, now so gloriously accomplished, was equaled by his zeal in rewarding those who had been instrumental in the execution of his will. By a decree of the 5th day of the eleventh month (Dec. 7), Shu Hoh-teh, the eminent victor, was promoted to the high dignity of "Minister who stands before the Emperor" or Grand-Chamberlain, and privileged to wear a double-eyed Peacock Feather. He also was invested with the eighth grade of nobility, transferable to his son (*Sh. h.* 49). Even before this glorious carnage, he was a favorite of his august master, for by a decree of the 2nd day of the fourth month of that same year (*Sh. h.* 171) the latter presented him and two other grandees with a copy of the famous giant work *Ku kin t'u shu tsih ch'ing*, to become an heirloom in their families. Nor did the emperor forget the Prefects of the rebellious districts. The insurgent chiefs, conveyed to Peking, had confessed that the Prefects of Sheu-chang and T'ang-yih, Shen Ts'i-i and Ch'en Mei, when captured and garroted by the rebels and prevailed upon to make common cause with them, scolded them so well that they had to pay for it with their lives. The emperor therefore decreed on the 13th of the tenth month (Nov. 16) that these faithful servants of the dynasty, together with the Sub-director of Studies in T'ang-yih, who also for soundly scolding the rebels suffered the same fate, should be proposed by the Board of Civil Office for Imperial distinctions (*Sh. h.* 244). A decree issued ten days later (ibid.) ordains the same with regard to yet other officers murdered in the surprised cities for a similar display of scolding heroism.

His Majesty had however, also to punish. Our readers know the

fate which befell the warriors who sallied forth from Old Lin-ts'ing, and could not again retire within its walls. Apart from this, Shu Hoh-teh felt compelled to lodge a complaint for cowardice against Manchus of the garrison at Teh-cheu, who had turned tail to the enemy. This, the emperor declares in a decree (*Sh. h.* 203) of the 10th of the tenth month (Nov. 13), is an unheard-of crime which stains the moral character of the Manchus in general; it is a matter absolutely contrary to the Manchu nature, and therefore highly deplorable. Shu Hoh-teh shall quickly put to death the principal deserters, in order that others may see what fate awaits them, should they behave in the same way. Those who did not run away quite so fast, shall have their names expunged from the registers of the Bannermen and be banished to Ili, there to be given as slaves to the Oelot; finally, the wives and children of all the deserters shall also be taken off the registers and expelled from Teh-cheu; they can then go where they like. One trembles to think what must have been the fate of those poor women and children, cast out helpless amongst a populace which intensely hates the Manchus as the instruments for oppression in the hands of the ruler. Thus even outside the pale of heretical life the murderous demon of fanaticism found human victims. But what are we to think ourselves of those Manchu Bannermen wavering when ordered to attack the rebels? Had long garrison life really effeminated them? Or were they also tainted with heresy?

The insurrection, in the suppression of which the Viceroy of Chihli, Cheu Yuen-li, took so active a part, moved this grandee to give his wise opinion to the emperor about the political line of conduct of the dynasty with respect to heresy. Wang Lun's rebellion, he argued, as stated in a decree of the 26th day of the tenth month or the Nov. 29 (*Sh. h.* 256)—emanated from heretical sectarianism. The White Lotus sect, that of the White Yang, that of the Pure Water, and any other, begin with holding meetings for Sutra readings. Then they collect contributions and spread their heresies abroad, while they practice boxing and fencing; and this leads to fomentation of rebellion. Now if these heretical sects are to be destroyed to the root,

the supervision of the wards must first of all everywhere become much stricter than it is, and the old ordinances regarding this part of the administration must be maintained with increased severity. Indeed, the emperor complains, hitherto these ordinances have been treated by the Prefects as a dead letter. Instructions shall therefore be sent to the Viceroys and Provincial Governors to take measures against the sects as proposed by their colleague of Chihli.—Such is the political sagacity of intolerance, the logic of fanaticism! That it is persecution which provokes rebellion, the persecutor does not see; —in order to put down the spirit of rebellion, he reasons, we must redouble the severity of the persecution!

While that short, but bloody religious war was raging, a fierce persecution of heresy was set on foot in Honan. Only a very few details are given us about it, in a decree of the 21st of the ninth month or the Oct. 25 (*Sh. h.* 256). In Peking, an engraver had been detained, called Ho T'ing-pang, from the district of Siang-fu, belonging to Khai-fung, the capital of Honan. He was one of the twelve chiefs of an association purporting to collect moneys for repairing a temple of the Yellow Dragon in Siang-fu, but which in reality was a "meritorious work society," teaching that after death its members would be sent back by Yama, the god of the infernal regions, to the earth, to convert mankind to righteousness. This community, the prisoner explained, counted already 123 male members, and had also a section of female members, 487 strong. A similar society had been founded in Ch'en-liu, a district near the capital of Honan, by the Buddhist priest Chung-i, spiritual father of Yuen-chi, a priest of the Yellow Dragon temple.

The necessity for a strict inquiry into this matter is the more imperative—the emperor declares—because very possibly this society makes common cause with the White Lotus sect, now in rebellion in Shantung. Ho Wei, the Governor of Honan, who is now with his troops at the frontiers, shall not yet proceed to persecute, but remember that "he who beats the bush frightens the serpents." For the present the Lieutenant Governor of his province, Yung Chu, shall confine himself to making very secret investigations, without

fanning slumbering discontent into open rebellion. Then later on, when the right moment has come, they shall strike. But should these sectaries, knowing that in Shantung the sects are in rebellion, prepare to rise also—then let vigorous measures at once be taken to prevent this.

We learn nothing further regarding this heresy hunt. But we may conclude that it was a bloody and cruel one, from the fact that the exasperation of the emperor and his faithful satraps must have reached a climax on having experienced that the society of the White Lotus, of the Pure Water, of the White Yang, and others of the kind had proved themselves capable of surprising his cities, killing his Prefects, resisting his armies for a time, and cutting off the food supply of the Metropolis. All these bold feats were far from excluding the chance that, some time or other, the heretics might even storm the Metropolis and his Palace. A retrospect of past events necessarily enhanced the Imperial fears. For hardly two hundred years had passed since this same Shantung, even the same portion of it which is intersected by the Imperial Canal, rose in open rebellion under the lead of the same Lotus sect against the heresy-hunting house of Ming. Had not their leader proclaimed himself emperor? Had he not conquered numerous cities? And had not that rebellion to be quenched in streams of blood, its suppression requiring many dozen years of devastating warfare?

Therefore, no lenity towards the sects, no religious tolerance, but increase of persecutions, increase of cruelty! That this perverse polity must be like oil thrown into a smoldering fire; that it must incite the people, of which even the female part had stood in arms in Lin-ts'ing, to more exasperation, greater despair and stronger resistance, these plain facts remained beyond the comprehension of the Confucian brain. Fanaticism never is clear-sighted, but that of Confucianism appears to be totally blind. Kao Tsung would live long enough to see yet more consequences of his disastrous polity. Once more under his reign a revolt would be attempted in that same portion of his realm. He would have to take the field against the persecuted Mohammedans in far Kansuh. He would have to mobilize

his armies to quench rebellion in distant Formosa. Nay, he would live to see his successor for nearly eight successive years wage a destructive religious war in no less than five provinces in the west, and exterminate the people there by fire and the sword. The first period of Kao Tsung's reign was one of persecution. The second necessarily became one of insurrection and warfare.

THE THREE LEAPS OF WANG LUN

BY ALFRED DÖBLIN

TRANSLATED BY C. D. GODWIN

CALLIGRAMS